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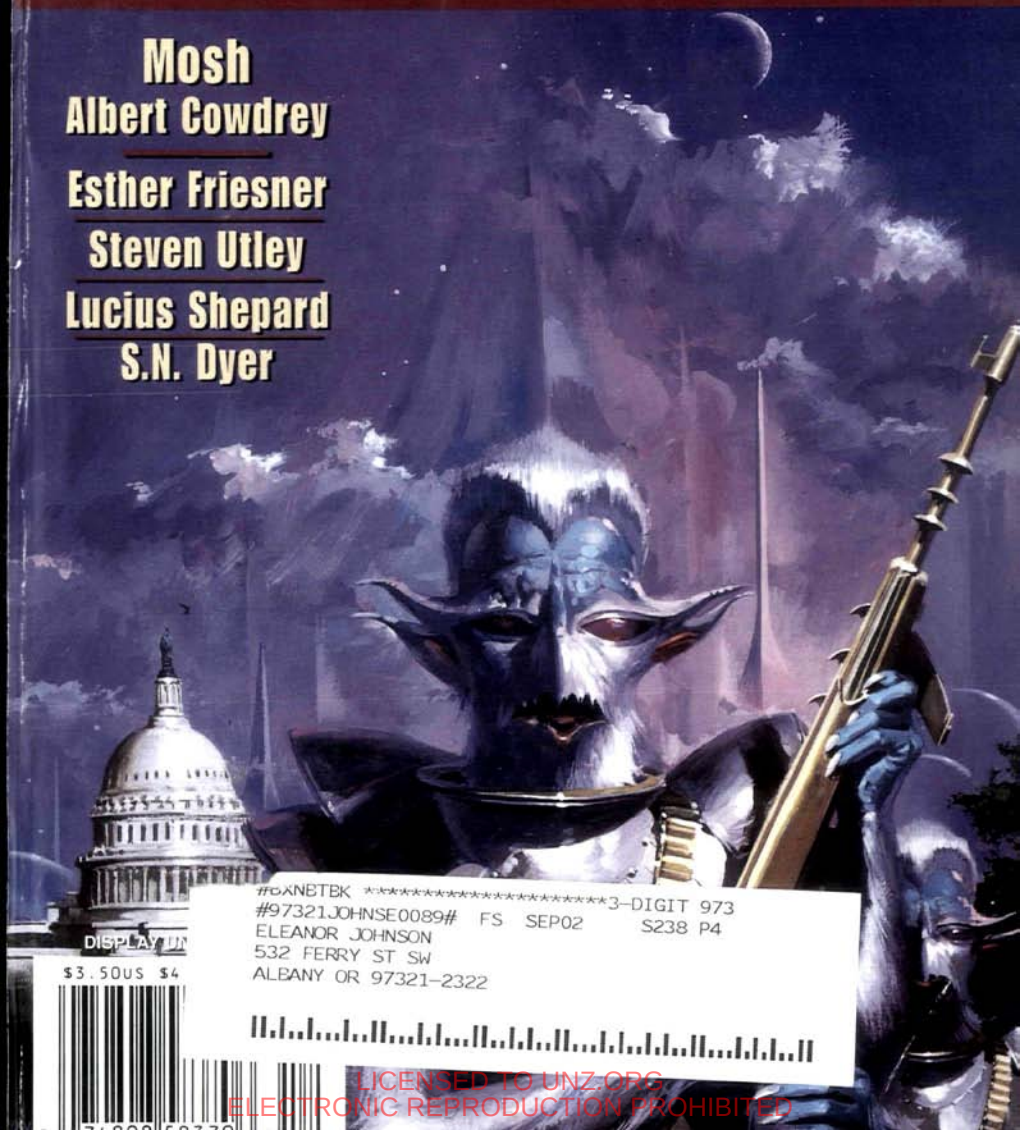

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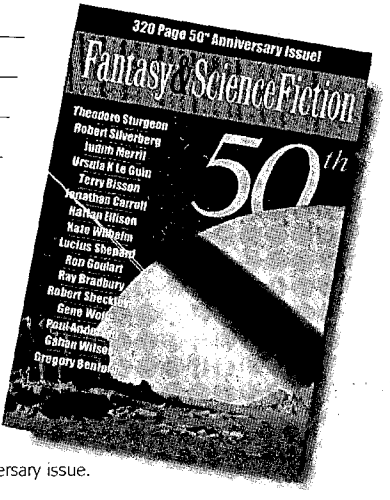

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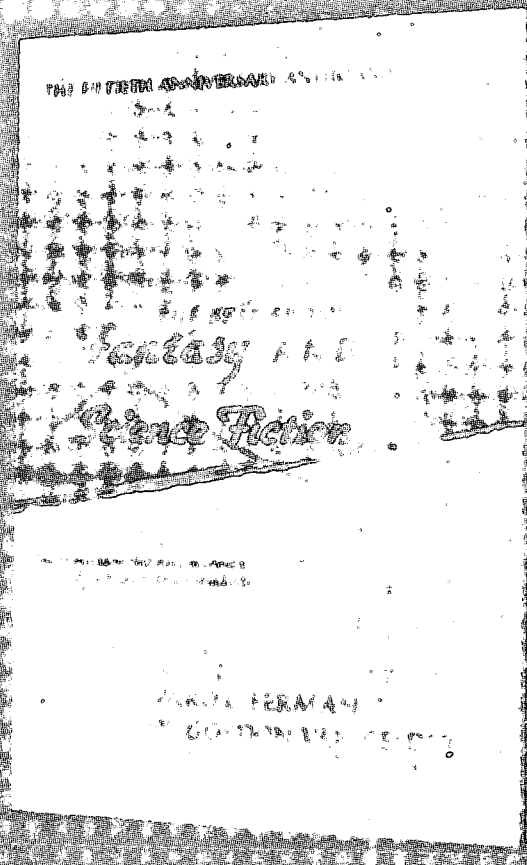

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction
December • 52nd Year of Publication

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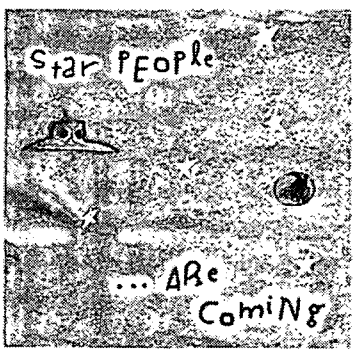
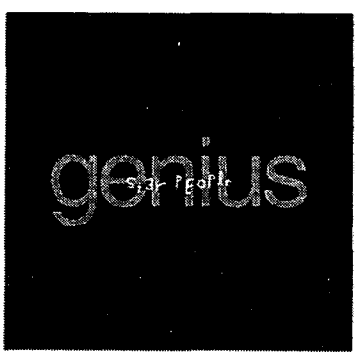
Star People





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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

I MUST introduce our new film columnist by noting that this month's piece appears here in spite of the objections of our esteemed film editor.

Mr. Ellison made it very clear that while he agrees with Mr. Shepard's overall assessment of the current condition of American culture, he feels that the opprobrium is misapplied towards this movie; he thinks it's almost as if Mr. Shepard approached the movie without any willingness to give the film its due. In Mr. Ellison's words, *X-Men* is "a perfectly good little movie" and "the best Saturday morning serial you're going to see." (Mr. Ellison also felt the piece was the sort of narrow, single-film review he came aboard originally to remove from the magazine.)

In the course of this discussion, I took it upon myself to see the film...and found my movie-going experience came much closer to Mr. Shepard's than to Mr. Ellison's. I think *X-Men* depends heavily upon the viewer's familiarity with the original comic books—those people who liked the film seemed to have brought with them a knowledge of and appreciation for the root material.

But the main thing I want to say here is that I don't think an editor needs to agree with a reviewer's assessment before publishing a review. Far from it, in fact — that approach has always smacked of cultural fascism to me. As an editor, I look for the reviews in this magazine to be thoughtful, insightful, accurate, and honest.

But what is the point of running film reviews that don't appear in print until six weeks after the movie has left the theaters (as ours so often do)?

It's the same as that of running book reviews months after the novels in question have been released. Although our consumerist culture likes to pretend otherwise, art doesn't disappear in six weeks to be replaced like a disposable razor blade. It lasts in various forms, and

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it's always new to the person who encounters it for the first time. My intention as editor is to give you columns that appreciate those works of art — steering you to good ones you might otherwise have overlooked, and chewing over the successes, failures, and implications of those you have encountered. A good review, to my mind, is as interesting to a person who has read or seen the work in question as it is to the person who has not.

With the addition of a second film columnist, I've decided to phase out the monthly science columns. Dr. Benford's contributions are always insightful and the team of Ms. Murphy and Mr. Doherty have given us lots of fun experiments, but for some time now, the columns just haven't felt very relevant to the rest of the magazine. Does this mean we're not interested in science any longer? Of course not (and besides, we couldn't find anyone to contribute a monthly column on alectryomancy). But we felt it was time for a change.

—GVG

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S. N. Dyer grew up in San Francisco and remembers when the Fillmore West was still the Winterland Ballroom (upstairs, over a Buick dealership). She says this story grew out of the fact that her local music stations are so dreadful that when she can't endure any more Easy Listening, she turns off the radio and imagines her own rock videos. You in turn can provide your own soundtrack to this dark fantasy.

Sunrise Blues

By S. N. Dyer

FANS GATHERED TODAY AT the Los Angeles grave of dead rocker Tom Paine on the twenty-fourth anniversary of his death. Paine, lead singer of the Seventies group Commonsense, *has been called The First Goth. The fans, who left black roses and paperback copies of* Dracula, *were a mix of aging baby boomers and newer acolytes, like this young gothette:*

What is it about Tom Paine that attracts your generation?

Blond girl, black garb and eyeliner, long blond hair.

"I speak only for myself."

What draws you?

"His death."

What? Pathetic and broke? Of a heroin overdose in a cheap motel?

"The vampires didn't get him."

Johnny Goldberg (former rhythm guitarist, *Commonsense):* We were so sincere then. Naive.

When we said, like *The Who*, that we hoped we'd die before we got old,

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we meant it. We were so afraid of winding up like our parents — Yeah, I know. Now we realize that they were the Heroic Generation, who survived the Depression and sacrificed in World War II — But when we were growing up, all we saw was the conformity, the repression, the hypocrisy.

Paine did it. He died before he got old.

500 All Time Greatest Rock Albums, number 462; Rites of Man, Tom Paine and Commonsense. This fusion of hard rock, blues, and off-the-wall mysticism rocked to 6 on the Billboard chart, where it stayed for seven weeks in 1972. Songs "Sunrise Blues" and "The Vampire's Wife" reached 8 and 13 respectively on the singles chart that year. Singer/songwriter Paine never equaled this success, but the band continued until 1974. Their triumphant concert finale is considered one of the most dramatic shows of the decade and paved the way for acts like *Kiss* and Ozzy Osborne. Paine died in 1976 of a drug overdose.

Joe Dearth (Former rock critic, *The Haight Ashbury Love Standard):* This was before heavy metal and Alice Cooper. I don't know where the whole vampire thing came from. Back then, if you were into vampires you were some geek who collected *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and watched *Dark Shadows* after school. Or stayed up late to catch Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee on *Creature Features* on Saturday night....You know, dateless wonders. I always preferred the big monster flicks. There was this one where a giant octopus attacks San Francisco and tears down the Bridge and the Ferry Building. It was lame. Victims had to actually run up to a pier and volunteer to get smashed.

Guiseppi Scapellini (Assistant Professor, Contemporary Music History, San Francisco State University): In the terms of the youth culture of the day, *vampires* symbolized either the older generation, attempting to suck the life of rebellious youth, or controlling women. Tom Paine took the metaphor and ran with it.

Johnny Goldberg: We were really distant cousins-in-law. That was when he was still Emanuel Lipinsky. We met at a bar mitzvah in the Valley — San

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Fernando, not Central — and hit it off. We both listened to this station that only came in late at night, XERB I think it was, that played delta blues. We were big Buddy Holly fans too. Everyone else we knew was listening to surf music, or Paul Anka.

When the Beatles came over, we grew our hair in cute little moptops and formed a group. *The Rubber Band.* We thought that was a great name, real witty.

We played in the Los Angeles All City Junior High Battle of the Bands. Every school had a *Rubber Band.*

We lost. We were awful.

Andy Shipp (former roadie and later drummer, *Commonsense):* Were we at Woodstock? No way, man.

Altamont? We didn't play, but we went to the show. You know when Marty Balin starts yelling at the Angels to stop trashing people? That was me they were beating up. Yeah. Well, I think. We all dropped acid and it's kind of a blur. Or I was doing crystal meth? Hell, I don't know. Got a smoke?

Last song, last concert: Tom Paine caressing the guitar strings, then pausing to sing.

"Never gonna get old,
Never gonna die.
Never gonna get old,
Never gonna die."

Guiseppi Scapellini: If you simply look at the way a person plays guitar, it says a lot about him, and the image he wishes to project. The old bands — the surfers, the British invasion — they held their guitar here, in front of their chests. It gives good control over the instrument and it also makes them seem almost cute, like they're cuddling something they cherish.

The bad boys, the rockers who thought they were dangerous, started dropping the guitar further and further, until it seems to sprout out of the crotch like an erect phallus. Now, in fact, a proper guitar is slung so low that the player has to slump or bend at the waist to reach the strings.

Tom Paine defied tradition to hold the guitar up high, like McCartney. Otherwise he couldn't have played those phenomenal blues riffs.

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I predict that the greatest cause of disability in future rock guitarists will be sciatica, not heroin.

Andy Shipp: Peoples' Park? Yeah, we were there. I had a van, you know, so I got to hang out with the band and meet girls 'n' stuff. Oh, and I scored the grass.

Peoples' Park. Yeah. I got beat up by the cops.

Concert at Peoples' Park, Berkeley, 1969: Five earnest looking boys in colonial garb, playing folk rock. Tom Paine and Johnny Goldberg, wearing tricorner hats over powdered hair, play electric guitar. Covers of Dylan, Ritchie Havens, Country Joe and the Fish, and a final almost inspired rock version of "We Shall Overcome."

Johnny Goldberg: We were at Berkeley, and really got into the student protest thing. End the War! Equal Rights! Power to the People!

Women's Lib? No way, man. They were still just *chicks* then.

We were in this band where we took revolutionary names. I was Johnny Tremayne, because I was a physics major and didn't know a lot of history, but I remembered the movie. We did the Sons of Liberty song. The Disney lawyers learned of it, and took out an injunction. But nó one had actually heard of us, we were totally obscure except on campus, so I'm told they sued *Paul Revere and the Raiders.* They were the band that played for Dick Clark on *Shindig.* They wore costumes too, and were probably dumbfounded when the Disney machine went after them. Or this may have just been one of Andy's paranoid raps. Memory, you know?

He actually got his name legally changed to *Tom Paine.* Good move. Emanuel Lipinsky is not a babe-magnet name. And Tom was a magnet.

The rest of us? Well, rhythm section is always second best, but I did all right. But Paine's sister Flower, you know? Judith. I hadn't seen her since high school, and she shows up one day with this long blond hair like the girl on *Mod Squad.* Man, I just worshipped her. Forever.

Andy Shipp: They were gods to me. See, I was a music major and I had no talent whatsoever. I knew all this history and theory and I could babble criticism with the A students, but I was entirely uncreative. And here's

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Tommy, this guy who's a philosophy major, and he's got this ability to sing and write and marry chords that never had even shaken hands before.

My roomie was their first drummer. I hung around and just sort of became their roadie. I had the VW microbus. We painted it paisley which seemed cool, but it made the cops always suspicious and they'd pull us over....

I started learning drums, figuring you didn't need a lot of talent, just an inner metronome. The frat boys in the dorm said I was bothering them, and beat me up.

This is one of those new music clubs, the New Beat on Irving, where today's youth come to drink espresso and listen to new rock bands, who can only dream of the day when they may be big enough to play at the Fillmore.

Hippies and weekend hippies at the table. Band barely seen through the smoke and old videotape. Tom Paine on lead, Johnny Goldberg on rhythm, both in denim pants and jackets, long hair, Goldberg with an almost rabbinical beard. Paine's sister Flower in a long tie-dyed gown, hunched over her electric bass, back to the audience. A disheveled, obviously drunk drummer.

A dark-haired woman in sunglasses sits alone at a table in front, stirring a cup of coffee. Three other untouched mugs sit before her. She watches Paine intently.

Andy Shipp: I knew this guy who had this house in the upper Haight, and everyone decided to move to Mendocino and grow carrots or something. So we got in on their lease. It was one of those spooky old narrow Victorians with bay windows that survived the Earthquake and Fire. It creaked a lot. Maybe that's when Tommy got into all the mystic stuff.

Anyway, he was a philosophy major and the job market isn't exactly crying out for those, so he decided to become a rock legend. We starved, man. We had these hopeless little gigs and played parties and dealt some grass on the side, and survived on brown rice and vegetables that Flower cooked.

* * *

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Johnny Goldberg: I graduated with honors in physics, and realized that if I went to grad school I'd either wind up teaching or working for the military industrial complex, so like Leary said, I turned on, tuned in, dropped out. I could do it because I didn't need the student deferment. I was *4F* for acne. Honest. If you had really bad acne on your back, they were afraid it would get infected if you carried a heavy pack. Every time I had to go for another physical at the draft board, I'd quit screwing and eat a lot of chocolate for a couple weeks.

Paine thought he was going to wind up in Vietnam, so it was live fast and have a good time before you die young. He was like a candle trying to burn out before it gutters, you know? Then the draft lottery came in and he was like number 360 or something, and it was a reprieve. He started concentrating on the music again, and we got better gigs. We became house band for this place on Irving that was owned by an old Beatnik poet, who felt all we hippies were his kids or something. Just doted on us.

It was down from the UC Hospital on Parnassus, and medical students would come by. Some of the girls had been science majors with me at Berkeley and it was funny. There they never liked me but now they couldn't wait to get involved. Free love and birth control. Yeah, I was in love with Flower but she was still a virgin, can you believe it? And these chicks were like practically flinging themselves at us. I wasn't nuts, you know.

Guiseppi Scapellini: There are two ways to think of it. The first is that the Sixties ended early, with Altamont and the Chicago riots, with the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, each new tragedy another stake in the heart of idealism.

In actuality, the Sixties lingered on until Nixon left office and the Vietnam War ended. Four years of slow death — of aging, moral compromise, and growing self-centeredness.

By the time *Commonsense* got to San Francisco, the Summer of Love was barely a memory. The Haight-Ashbury was no longer a dichotomy of straight and cool. It had become a world divided between the predators and the victims.

Johnny Goldberg: So we're playing, and our drummer — this guy named Beechnut, honest — was always stoned and that night he'd taken

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something, I don't know what. The beat keeps getting slower and slower and Flower is like whispering and nudging him but something weird is happening.

There's this woman who came to the place at least three nights a week. She's got long black hair and is very pale, wears black. Very beatnik, I guess, and she was old. At least thirty. Back then it was *Never trust anyone over thirty*. Now, I'm like *Never trust anyone under thirty* and I'm getting to the point where I'm getting suspicious if you're less than forty. But she was gorgeous.

Anyway, she always sits in the front row of tables with coffee cooling in front of her, rebuffs anyone who comes near, and stares at Paine. He's interested — who wouldn't be, in a Mrs. Robinson sort of way? But she intimidates us.

So this night, Beechnut gets slower and slower and then he sort of wilts over his drum set and slides to the floor, and it's kind of quiet at first because we've lost our drums and then it's real noisy as the cymbals get pulled over on top of him.

We're looking at him and for once there aren't any med students or interns in the audience. Then this woman — Sage, that was her name — stands up and walks over. She bends over and examines him, then beckons to Andy our roadie and says, "Take him outside and call an ambulance. Too many barbiturates. He needs to go to Casualty — to an emergency room."

She's commanding. The sort of compelling attitude that makes you follow generals into battle or preachers into mass suicide. And she's got this upper-class English accent. And any English accent, of course, just makes you unbearably cool.

Paine says, "Wow, thanks, like are you a nurse or something?" There were a few women doctors back then, but it didn't occur to you.

She just says, "I'm a drummer."Frankly, that was even weirder than if she'd been a doctor. Women in rock groups sang and played maybe a tambourine, except there was one all chick band — *Ace of Clubs* or something — playing the Haight, and it didn't really matter if they were any good, just that they did it. I think Samuel Johnson said that. I've gotten into literature now that I'm older. We were strange enough that we had Flower on bass.

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Oh yeah, *Velvet Underground* had a girl drummer. But that was New York and they were trying to be as weird as they could.

Then Sage lifts Beechnut, granted he was a speed freak and real skinny and no teeth either, and puts him in Andy's arms, and starts to reset the drum kit. So we let her sit in, and she was good. Not flashy like Ginger Baker, just solid, held a beat, knew when a little snare or cymbals were called for.

After the last set we went home and she just came with us. Nothing said. She walked into Paine's bedroom with him. The walls were thin, and I didn't get much sleep until she left, right around dawn.

Joe Dearth: I lived in North Beach, but I had a girlfriend in the Sunset. Okay, she was just a kid but I'd go over when her parents were away. The Sunset is this completely boring district built on sand dunes, south and west of Golden Gate Park. The streets are alphabetic north/south, and numbers east/west, until you run into the ocean. It's gridlike and boring and bourgeois, except for this area where my girlfriend lived in the Funstan hills, where the perpendicular streets bent and twisted and intersected. It was like the *Twilight Zone*, and I'd always get lost and just drive around in the fog till I saw her street. I called her my demon lover and sometimes I'm not really sure the whole thing wasn't some Poe fantasy, except I ran into her recently at a comedy shop and she's vice-president of some internet stock firm.

But anyway, sometimes she'd sneak out and we'd go to the coffee shop. I wasn't all that impressed by *Commonsense*. They were, well, an okay cover band with delusions of grandeur. Paine wrote some nice stuff, but it was uninspired, like a bluesy Jim Morrison without clinical insanity, and they just weren't good enough musicians to carry it off. I had a crush on Flower's back — who didn't? — but then they got this incredible, hot new drummer named Sage. It was like the band suddenly had a backbone. Like they were crawling up out of the sea to evolve.

Andy Shipp: Sage was wonderful. She like exuded sex appeal. I didn't try anything because now she was Tommy's old lady. She thought it was amusing that I wanted to be a drummer, despite having no talent, and she would give me lessons. Only at night. We never saw her before sunset and

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she always left before the sun came up. So I sound-proofed the garage and we'd work on my drumming in the middle of the night. Well, I'd drum and she'd come down in a robe, hair all messy — you knew they'd just finished some bang-up sex — and she'd show me another riff to learn and go back into the house. Knowing what they were up to while I was pounding the drums — man, it was inspiring. It's probably why I'm as adequate as I am.

Sometimes you could still hear me from the street, and the cops'd come by and beat me up.

Joe Dearth: The band kept getting more and more interesting. Not just because they now had the sexiest rhythm section in the history of the world.

No, their blues sound got harder, and the lyrics were mystical and romantic yet death oriented. Not like the teen death songs of the early sixties — *Last Kiss, Teen Angel, Tell Laura I Love Her.* It was like Death is some higher plane that will make our love last longer. Paine started wearing black, like Sage the drummer. Flower kept her innocent hippie virgin look, and their rhythm guitarist, I can't remember his name, he always looked like a Hasidic science nerd stoned on pot. Even later, when they were the big act and wore costumes, he wore this Victorian suit and looked like, I dunno, Professor Van Helsing's rabbi. They started singing a version of *Sunrise Blues* back then, still primitive.

Let's make the night last, because every morning you die, and every morning I die without you.

Johnny Goldberg: There may be something else in nature more dramatic or pathetic than a young man hopelessly in love for the first time, but I don't know what it might be. The Black Plague, maybe, or the last passenger pigeon, or continental drift. You got me.

Andy Shipp: One night she's late. Sage doesn't show, and we start the first set without her, Flower trying to carry the beat alone on her bass. About half an hour later, Sage walks in with this tall skinny English guy in, honest to God, a tweed suit. He seemed ancient to me. He must have been forty or something.

Have you noticed how people then looked older? I mean, you look at

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Bogart or those guys from the old movies, when they were forty they looked ancient. I don't think it's just me getting older. It's better nutrition and less tobacco and antibiotics, something prosaic like that probably, but this guy, he seemed timeless.

Sage drags him up on stage and says, "This is Gage. He wants to sit in."

Tom gets all huffy. I think we all realized that this dude was, not her husband, her master or something. She was his mistress. That was cool then, a guy practically owning a girl. Real cool. What bothered us was that he seemed so old.

But his suit was sort of old fashioned and he's got short hair and no sideburns so it's like, I dunno, Mr. Chips auditioning with the Stones. Some weird discrepant glitch in reality. Rod Serling about to narrate.

"Give him your axe," she says, so Tommy does.

Joe Dearth: The drummer arrived late with an older man who took Paine's guitar. He hit the strings, tuned one or two with this unnerving sneer. "*Crossroads,*" he says.

We all thought, this guy is completely straight. (Back in the Sixties, *straight* meant not hip. It had nothing to do with sexual orientation. Though, of course, everyone's parents pretty much are always straight.) What can he do?

And he does Clapton riffs. Perfect single string blues like B.B. King. Dropdead quality string-slamming Townsend. Even a touch of Hendrix wa-wa. It was like you go to the Twin Peaks Elementary School Christmas Pageant, and Pavarotti steps on stage.

Flower is the first to enter in, turning around for the first time so we can actually see her face, just staring at this guy as she plays. Worshipping him. Then the rhythm guy joins in, and Sage on drums. Paine is clenching his fists — this guitarist is so good, it's clear he's not really needed. So he sings.

Johnny Goldberg: It was incredible. Everyone cheered. The old guy says, "*Statesboro Blues,*" so we play that.

Then Paine says, "Okay, enough, I want my Fender back."

The old guy grins. "*Sunrise Blues,*" he says. So of course Paine has to sing it, and it achieves, I don't know, heights of passion and sorrow.

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Because it's about a guy whose girl leaves him every morning for her husband or whatever, and now those two lovers are fighting it out on stage.

At the end of that, even Paine realized the dude had to stay. He could hate him all he wanted, fear him, but now we were going to be great.

Joe Dearth: Gage joined *Commonsense*. I came back every night I could, and never wrote about it. Word of mouth was already making it hard to get in. It was a small club.

The show was almost as good as the music. The lead guitar and the singer were fighting over the drummer on stage. They'd be leaning in toward her, addressing solos and lyrics directly at her. Grinding against the guitar, caressing the microphone, God! At times it was almost pornographic.

Andy Shipp: It was crowded, and people might get rowdy waiting for the band. I was doubling as a bouncer, like coffee houses needed bouncers. "I'm sorry, sir, you've had enough cappuccino, I'll have to call a cab."

I was a lousy bouncer. I got beat up a lot.

Come on baby, don't you weep.
You'll see your husband when you sleep.
Tonight is just for you and me.
A night can be eternity.

— "The Vampire's Wife," Tom Paine, *Rites of Man*.

Guiseppi Scapellini: It's odd. I was at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame when they had the exhibit of early blues. There was an old photograph from the Thirties of Robert Johnson and some other doomed blues pioneers. A tall white man was standing with them, half turned away from the camera. The caption identified him as "Picadilly Slim."

When I next saw the film of *Commonsense*'s last concert, I looked at the guitarist and said, "My God. It's Picadilly Slim."

Of course, it couldn't be. There was a thirty-five year gap between the photograph and the film. But it looked awfully like him.

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Johnny Goldberg: Paine was my buddy, man. We'd been best friends since we were thirteen. We shared everything — except the chicks, and even some of them. Never Sage, though.

So now we're growing apart. It's not only that Paine's now the important guy in the band, and I'm fading into the background, not even going to be a Trivial Pursuit question like the backup guys in the *Jimi Hendrix Experience.* It's that he's obsessed. He's spending all day writing this incredible music and practicing guitar — like he wants to be able to fight it out with Gage in some musical duel.

Gage always leaves right after the show, so Sage comes home with us. One day the old guy looks at Flower and beckons to her.

Paine grabs his sister and holds her by the arm.

Gage says — and his voice is even more quiet and commanding than Sage's, only menacing too — "You have my woman. You must lend me one of yours."

It was all very melodramatic. Andy, our roadie at the time, makes a run at the old guy, who just knocks him down. I was going to be next, but Flower holds out her hand to him.

"I won't hurt her," he says. "I want to enjoy her innocence and naiveté, to inhale the scent of the bloom before it fades."

And I hate to say it, she really did blossom. She started wearing black too, with plunging necklines, and sticking her tongue between her teeth all pensive-like as she fondled the bass, and sort of writhing instead of just being one of those comatose bass players like before. I was so jealous I could have died.

But we were getting lots of groupies then too, so it wasn't like I was hard up or anything.

Joe Dearth: My girlfriend became pregnant and was sent off to a home for unwed mothers in the midwest. I kept going to *The New Beat,* and one day I saw Bill Graham there. Between sets he went up, handed his card to Paine, said something.

Shit, I thought. Here goes my secret spot, the hidden club that is so cool only the cognoscenti know about it.

Next week they had one of those jazz bands where there's a sax, a piano, a standup bass and a drummer who sticks to brushes. I was so depressed.

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Andy Shipp: They're going to audition for the Fillmore. Man, it's like this old movie with I think Judy Garland or Mickey Rooney, and they put on a show and Flo Ziegfield is in the audience. Or did I dream that? Anyway, we go home and we're all, even Gage, hitting the wine. And Sage and Tommy go into his bedroom, and after a while Gage picks up and follows them.

I'm thinking, Whoa, cool, universal love and three way sex, man. We'll all be rich and famous, even me the roadie, and have group sex too. It'll be like heaven.

Or else Gage'll try to kill him and I'll get beat up again. I keep drinking — we were celebrating, we bought Boone's Farm Apple Wine which was 95 cents for a fifth, not jug stuff — and I guess I passed out on the cushions.

I want to spend the night with you,
And dream away the sunrise blues.
— "Sunrise Blues," Tom Paine, *Rites of Man*

Johnny Goldberg: I wound up in bed with Flower, which was very nice, but her heart wasn't really in it. It was almost like she'd been asked, no, told to keep me occupied. We never made love again. After that it was just groupies for the both of us. Yeah, there are male groupies but they're generally called musicians or journalists.

Next afternoon, when we get up, we've like got to get ready for the audition. But Paine's still in bed, and Gage and Sage too, one presumes. We wait, and finally can't wait anymore and knock on the door.

The room's like a disaster. Well, it always was, but there's sheets and stuff all over, and it's clear a good time was had by all. Paine's lying there naked, alone.

"Come on, man, get dressed. We got a gig," I say. "Where's the others?"

"They're gone," he says. "They won't be coming back."

"Son of a bitch!" I scream. "What'd you do? We were gonna be stars!"

I grab him by the pits and haul him up so I can berate him face to face. I can only think about how he's pissed off the important part of the band, and we're nothing without them.

"I gave her my soul," he says. "And he took my talent."

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"Whiny asshole," I say, and let go. And he falls down like he's an empty sheet.

Rolling Stone, Sept 1971. *Singer Tom Paine of the San Francisco cult band* Commonsense *was hospitalized at University of California Medical Center with severe anemia, on the same day his group was to audition for the Fillmore. Assistants to impressario Bill Graham issued this statement: "We'll still let him audition, if he survives."*

Andy Shipp: They gave him four units of blood and kept him in the hospital three weeks. They did every test they knew, looked everywhere the sun don't shine, but never found out what caused it and it didn't come back.

He was real depressed, wouldn't move or talk.

They called in a shrink who decided Tommy's fascination with vampires and the occult had led him to drain his own blood. They were going to transfer him to the mental hospital, but we busted him out.

I knew some roadies for the *Dead*. They were on tour but let us stay up at their ranch at Forest Knolls, over in Marin, while Tommy recuperated and we practiced. He'd really improved on the guitar, and I could fake the drumming okay, so we got the Fillmore gig. We were good, too, but we would have been great with the others. I don't know why they left. We would've been, I don't know, immortal. It would've been, like, *Hendrix, Dylan, the Beatles, the Stones, and Commonsense.* Man.

Guiseppi Scapellini: Tom Paine's *Commonsense* played seven weeks in a row at the Fillmore. Their first album, *Rites of Man*, came out soon after, in '72, earning them a place in rock history for their meteoric rise and brief anticlimactic career. They simply never repeated their early success. The subsequent albums were still fine quality music, but they never advanced.

Joe Dearth: If you've heard one *Commonsense* album, you've heard them all. And Paine's attitude was, well, a drag. I mean, I'd seen his girlfriend, I knew how hot she was, but let it go! Instead, it's album after album of "undead bloodsucking woman ruined my life, took my soul." Give us a break, already.

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But the sad fact is, the public likes the same old thing over and over. That's why *Gunsmoke* lasted twenty years. The first album was surprising and innovative, the sort of thing now that critics love and only a few people buy, except in the sixties everyone was open to exciting new stuff.

But then they kept doing the same thing over and over. Their albums sold steady if not sensational, and they toured with black capes and special effects and all. So they weren't only the first goth band, like they're called now, they were the first mass market sellouts. Well okay, not really. But I'd seen them from the beginning, so I took it personally.

Audio tape, recording session, Tom Paine and Commonsense *third album.* You Put a Stake through My Heart.

Loud, messy guitar riff.

Voice of Tom Paine: Shit!

Voice of Johnny Goldberg: It's cool man, try again, you'll get it.

Paine: No, you *don't get it. It's all shit. It's going to be all shit.*

Goldberg: Not this again. Come on man, maybe you ought to take that Elavil.

Paine: They did it to me.

Goldberg: Or grass. Anyone got some grass? Shipp, you're always holding.

Voice of drummer Andy Shipp: Huh? I wasn't listening, man.

Goldberg: For God's sake, Paine. She left you. Grow up already.

Shipp: I need a doobie, man. Flower? Cool. Tommy, Johnny, call us when you're ready again.

Sound of door slamming.

Paine: You don't understand. They were vampires.

Goldberg: And they took your blood and left you heartbroken. Give me a fucking break, I am sick of this.

Paine: They took my talent.

Goldberg: Bull. You're incredible, man. You write, you play. Get a grip.

Paine: They left what was there. They took my potential. See, the undead can't create. They can't dream and innovate and aspire. They can only take. So they took my dreams and my innovation. Yeah, I'm good. But I'm never going to get any better. It's like I'm frozen.

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Goldberg: Shit, we got to get back to this song...Look on the bright side, okay? You've been bit by a vampire, so you'll live forever, right?

Paine: I said to them, at least make me a vampire too. They just laughed at me. We only replace ourselves, they said. One of us would have to die first.

Flower: Hey you guys, come quick, There's some reggae band out here and they're beating up Andy.

Guiseppi Scapellini: Even now, in the days of holograms and digital sound and computer effects, nothing can equal the final show of *Commonsense* for sheer kitsch bravura and bad taste. It is impressive, despite the bizarre scenario and obvious special effects, a sort of Götterdämmerung Meets Dracula.

The film is, I believe, a favorite with *Beavis and Butthead.*

Film: Tom Paine's *Commonsense, The Farewell Tour.* The stage set is an expressionistic castle out of the first Universal *Frankenstein.* Bats swoop and soar randomly overhead, manipulated by stagehands.

Dry ice periodically fogs the stage.

Paine is dressed in black leather pants and boots, with a lace-fronted shirt that he rips off early in the performance. He struts back and forth, thrusting with guitar and pelvis. The other bandmembers are in black also, Flower in a seductive slinky gown, Goldberg in a suit that largely makes him invisible.

"Drink my blood, take my life,
I'll give it all to the vampire's wife."

Johnny Goldberg: They were there. In the audience. I saw them, and pointed them out to Paine. I couldn't believe it. He sends some roadies to bring them up. Between numbers he quiets down the audience and says, "Hey, these guys were with our band before we made it." He's drunk or stoned or something, we all were. He just wasn't holding it as well anymore. Everyone cheers. They were all drunk or stoned or contact high; they would have cheered if he'd announced the end of civilization.

So Paine kisses Sage. Gage, ever the gentleman to appearances, he walks over to Flower and kisses her hand.

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"Let's have them sit in for a number, shall we?" Paine shouts, and of course the audience shouts back yeah.

"Paine, I don't think that's a good idea, man," I say. But he grabs my guitar and hands it to Gage, and Sage takes over from Shipp at the drums.

"*Crossroads,*" Paine says, and they do it. It was incredible.

Film, final concert: The tall gray man plays guitar like a dream. The dark-haired woman in shades and black decolletage pounds at the toms. Flower stares down at her bass, as if afraid to move. Paine clutches the microphone with both hands and bellows the lyrics, then points to the guitarist to solo.

The man bends over his instrument, concentrating. Paine stalks back and forth, swinging the microphone, in a *Who* tribute perhaps, then throws it down in a haze of feedback and pulls off his guitar. In another burst of meaningless sound he smashes the guitar onto the stage. The body separates from the neck.

The crowd goes wild. The solo continues, unmindful. The woman at the drums, though, looks suddenly frightened. She rises, and Andy Shipp slides back in with barely a missed beat.

Paine stands, arms raised to the ceiling, Fender neck in his hand, strings dangling. Then he turns, and lunges at the guitarist.

The dark-haired woman flings herself between them. The wooden guitar neck seems to enter her between her breasts, to stake her. There is an explosion of light, and when it dissipates she's gone.

Paine slumps onto his knees.

The tall man flings down his own guitar and screams. Then, eerily, he rises off the stage and hovers, staring intently.

The man floats back down. He grasps Paine by the hair and hisses something at him. Then he reaches out one hand toward the bass player.

As in a dream, Flower goes to him, and they leave.

Paine rolls onto his back, pounding the stage with both hands, and screams. And screams until it fades to black.

Joe Dearth: A classic. I just don't get it.

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Johnny Goldberg: We canceled the rest of the tour, never got together again. I tried to be there for Paine, but we'd burned a lot of bridges over the years. You can't stay best friends forever, especially when you're always expected to be the quiet supportive guy in the background and don't get anything in return. Paine was drinking and using hard drugs. He ran through everything, with the help of his entourage and the groupies, had every form of VD known to God and man and was losing his liver. He wound up staying in Shipp's basement.

Andy Shipp: I'd been sending lots of money to my big brother, who wanted a shoe store of all things, and it went national chain so I was comfortable. I moved to Santa Barbara and learned how to surf and got married to this girl who was like into pots. No, she was a potter. You know, ceramics?

So one day in '76 Tommy shows up and he's dead broke and strung out. I let him stay. Then one day when I'm on the beach, he makes a pass at my wife and I punched him out. I guess I feel bad about it. Beat myself up over it. It was only a few weeks later he was found floating at the bottom of the pool, needle still in his arm. Like, water and horse don't mix, you know?

Johnny Goldberg: I went into seclusion in a commune in Sonoma, the Russian River, for a while, until I realized everyone there was leaching off my fame and money, so I moved to this cabin in Alaska. After a couple years I decided it was time to get back to civilization, plumbing and electricity and all. An old friend from Berkeley turned me on to the *Macintosh 128,* and we started messing around with it and now we have this business where we design software for musicians and artists and stuff. Animators, mostly. Every time you see a dinosaur wink, that's my algorithm. Not blinking, that's someone else.

Algorithm and blues, that's going to be my epitaph. Except I only listen to classical now. Except Mozart. Mozart, man, he reminds me too much of Paine.

I married this Eskimo girl I'd sent through Juilliard, and we're on our way to having a string quartet. My mom's finally starting to like her, but they argue about stuff like, is whale blubber kosher?

* * *

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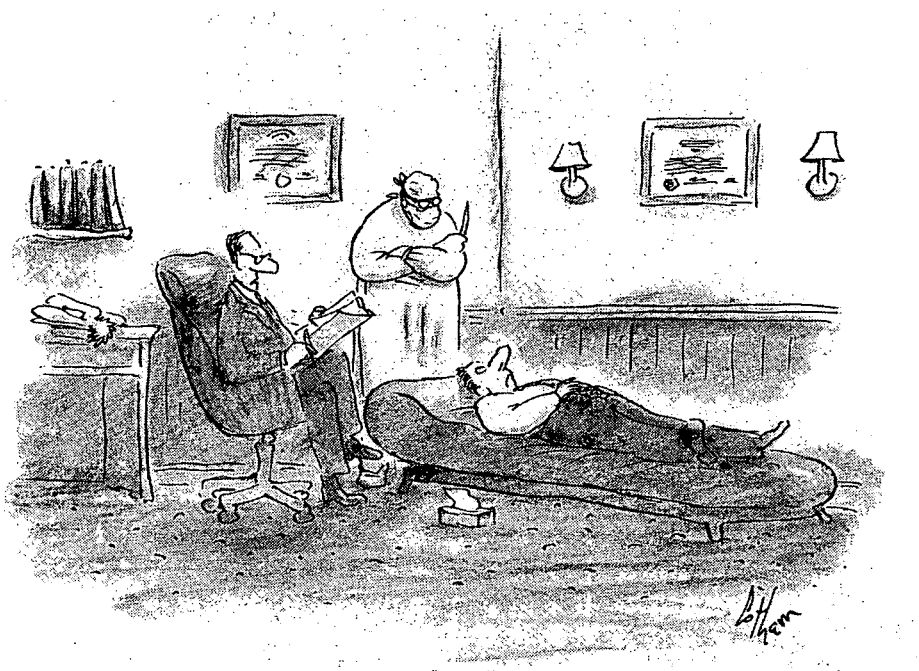
Joe Dearth: In a way, I'm glad it ended as it did. There's nothing sadder than all these almost elderly rock stars going on tour, flashing their sexagenarian pecs and strutting around like they're still cool. At least *Commonsense* had a good ending. It died before it got old.

Johnny Goldberg: Weirdest thing. I thought I'd go down this year to the cemetery and watch all the dorky fans put flowers on his grave. No, honey, I wasn't trying to see if I had any groupies left.

It was so weird. There was this blond girl there, they were interviewing her for TV. She looked just like Flower, man. Like she hadn't aged a day.

I wanted to go talk to her, but my wife's the jealous sort. And you don't want a jealous Eskimo on your hands, right, honey?



"Should therapy fail, however, a surgeon is standing by to perform a lobotomy."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, by J. K. Rowling, Scholastic/ Arthur A. Levine, 2000, $25.95.

JUST TO PUT this in perspective, I'm writing this column a few days after the release of the new Harry Potter book and have yet to read other reviews or final takes on the marketing of it. I mention the latter because, in this case, the marketing has been almost as interesting as the book itself and certainly more controversial.

Much as I enjoyed the first three books of this projected seven-book series, I was prepared to be disappointed by volume four. Don't get me wrong. I'm delighted with Rowling's success to date, but all the hoopla surrounding this latest release seemed, from my increasingly cynical perspective as the release date approached, to be hiding a bad book behind the hullabaloo:

No review copies before publication. Keeping the title a secret almost up to publication day. Only one or two interviews allowed per country. Threats against booksellers who might jump the gun on the book's release (those found guilty would never be able to buy another Potter book from the publisher again). And the length: at 752 pages, it's long (or as Jim Mullen said in his "Hotsheet" column in *Entertainment Weekly*, "for kids 12 to 14. They start it at 12 and finish at 14").

It appeared that Ms. Rowling's publishers were intent on getting as many first-day sales as possible before the truth set in that it wasn't that good a book. The length of volume four (almost twice that of the last one) and scarcity of interviews made me think that the author had decided she didn't want to be edited anymore and had gotten a bit of a swelled head about her own importance.

Well, after reading it and

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viewing a recent interview, I now feel that I was wrong on all accounts.

First off, the book is a welcome addition to the Harry Potter canon as it now stands. Yes, it's long. The first chapter could have been dropped, and it takes about eighty pages to get into the main story. There are also any number of asides taken. But the thing is, it's all readable and entertaining, nonetheless.

The story's darker than the previous volumes, dealing with mortality and racism and human rights issues, but all of them treated with a light sure hand — as part of the story, rather than the author preaching to us. But it's funnier, too, with additions such as tabloid reporter Rita Skeeter who'll make up a story if she can't find anything shocking enough to write about. And the characters are all a little older, entering puberty now, so there's still growth and change in the series.

As for the marketing of the book, I've come to believe Rowling's assertion that she didn't want any of the story spoiled for her young readers by advance reviews. My jury's still out on the editing issue, but if Rowling's not being edited, then she knows what she's doing because the book works. And her reluctance to being interviewed? Having just seen a documentary/interview about her on CBC's Newsworld, I can understand her wanting to back away from the furor. After all, she's a writer. If she gives in to all the demands on her time, she won't actually have time to write any books. And at her current level of popularity she could be doing media 24-7.

For those out there who feel that the attention the Harry Potter books are getting is too much: sure, the series isn't going to be for everyone. But it does have children who normally wouldn't be reading — especially boys — excited about books once again. And don't kid yourself. They *will* go on to read other books.

Remember when Stephen King got adults back into bookstores? People were complaining then that all those new readers were looking for was new Stephen King material. But the truth of the matter is that many of them, when they couldn't find a new King, went on to try other authors because his books had shown them that books could be as entertaining as other media.

So this is a good thing. And my final take on the marketing of the Harry Potter books is, it was fun. There were parties in bookstores, children were excited about something printed on a page, and the idea

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of reading and books was all over the media for more than a few days. It can't have hurt.

J. K. Rowling: The Wizard Behind Harry Potter, by Marc Shapiro, St. Martin's Griffin, 2000, $4.99.

A biography of Rowling seems appropriate at this time, considering all the interest in her Harry Potter books, but this is a lightweight entry that, while it might appeal to the young reader in your life, won't be of as much interest to adults. There's simply not enough substance.

Shapiro gets some facts wrong, which makes one wonder about the rest of the information. For instance, he has the wrong title for book four in the series, which suggests that he didn't have any inside information at all. And he perpetuates erroneous information such as Rowling living in an unheated apartment while writing the first book (in the aforementioned Newsworld interview, Rowling makes a point of debunking the mistaken mythology built up by the press of which the unheated apartment is a prime example).

He also annoyed me when he wrote that the appeal of fantasy is that there are no rules in it — anything can happen. As most aficionados of the field know (and Rowling reiterates this point in that Newsworld interview), there *have* to be rules, because if anything can happen, then what's the point of reading the story? If the characters can simply pull a rabbit out of the hat every time they're in trouble, then the story loses all its tension.

But with all of that said, Shapiro has a nice breezy writing style and is obviously enthusiastic about his material. If you approach this book expecting to get no more out of it than you would a profile in *People*, then you probably won't be disappointed.

Spindle's Gold, by Robin McKinley, Putnam, 2000, $19.95.

There is only one word to describe this book, and that's luminescent. What begins as a somewhat lighthearted take on the classic fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty" soon evolves into a book that shines like spun gold, but also carries the weight of that precious metal in the depth of its mythic resonance and the sweet, simple kindheartedness that rings out like birdsong on a perfect spring morning.

All of which tells you nothing about the book, I know. But the

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thing of it is, sharing with you some of the plot and set-up (which I will in a moment) can't begin to capture the heart of this wonderful story. There is more here than words on the page, but it's as hard to explain as it ever is when you try to map what lies between the lines of what one can actually read.

Still, let me give it a try.

As in the fairy tale, a princess is born, cursed to die on her twenty-first birthday by pricking her finger on a spindle. However, instead of being locked away in a tower, this princess (who comes to be known as Rosie) is spirited away by a peasant fairy named Katriona and raised in a village far off from the center of things, her heritage and whereabouts unknown to all but Katriona and her Aunt.

This princess grows into a tall, strong girl who keeps her hair cut short and wears men's breeches. She becomes a kind of veterinarian, something made easier for her by the fact that she can understand and speak with animals. Much of the book, in fact, is less a fairy tale, and more a coming-of-age novel as we watch Rosie grow from a wild little girl into a competent (but still a little wild) young woman.

But the fairy tale is still present, and when it comes back into her life we see the connection between who she is, her life in the village and her friends, and how all of this will help her stand up to the evil fairy who cursed her when she was an infant.

McKinley does a fabulous job all round, but I was particularly taken by the system of magic she set up for her secondary world — its whimsy and its dangers — and utterly enchanted with her depictions of Rosie's conversations with various animals. Somehow McKinley manages to capture the dialogue of the beasts so that their personalities ring true and don't feel at all anthropomorphized. For example:

"Rosie spoke to the half-wild birds in the mews, who answered in images as sharp as knives and flung as quickly as a falcon seizing a smaller bird out of the air. They spoke of death and food, and of their handlers, whom they both hated and loved, for they were only half-wild, and they knew it."

Or:

"Cats were the easiest of the beasts for humans to talk to, if you call it talking, and most fairies could carry on some kind of colloquy with a cat. But conversations with cats were more or less riddle games, and if you were getting the answer too quickly, the cat merely changed the

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ground on you. Katriona's theory was that cats were one of the few members of the animal kingdom who had a strong artistic sense, and that aggravated chaos was the chief feline art form, but she had never coaxed a straight enough answer out of a cat to be sure. It was the sort of thing a cat would like a human to think, particularly if it weren't true."

Throughout the novel, McKinley plays fair with the original fairy tale, but hardly ever does any of it work out the way one would think it would, which only adds to the fun. But to be honest, this is one of those rare occasions when the writing is so good, and the novel has so much heart, that the plot almost doesn't matter. That there is a strong storyline only adds to the book's unequivocal success.

The Stone Fey, by Robin McKinley, Harcourt Brace, 1998, $17.

While we're discussing McKinley, I'd like to make a brief mention of this older picture book just in case you hadn't seen or heard of it before. It was certainly new to me.

It's the story of a young shepherdess named Maddy who finds something mysterious in the hills where she keeps her flocks, something that can completely change her life around if she lets it.

The many watercolors by John Clapp are lovely — a couple are even inspired — while McKinley's prose reads like an adult short story, rather than a children's book. Though perhaps that's simply the mark of a good writer: one who doesn't write down to her audience.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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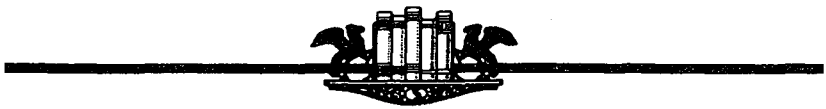

BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

In the Upper Room and Other Likely Stories, by Terry Bisson, Tor, 2000, $24.95.

Perpetuity Blues and Other Stories, by Neal Barrett, Jr., Golden Gryphon Press, 2000, $21.95.

THERE IS IN science fiction and fantasy (in any genre, I think) a strong pull between the commercial and creative, a pull that largely defines the vagaries of the field from pulp inception through New Wave inundation to current marketing tactics: on the one hand, a decided inclination for brand names, familiar tastes, comfortable packaging; and on the other, a yearning for maverick status, a drive to plunge headlong and reckless into no man's land, to read (or write) things never read and written before.

Forever a close call out there on the edge, once you've left civilization and all Aunt Sallies behind. Loath to take chances with the novels upon which he or she relies for income, the genre writer probably elects to dock ship not too far off formula. With stories, though, the investment is smaller; they permit indulgence, exploration — and because of this, much of the most creative work gets done in the short-story form. Most stories, even those by stone pros, are written amateurishly, written because the writer can't resist the attraction of an idea, because he or she wants relief from the sheer plod of a novel just completed or in progress — or from simple love of the form itself.

Often in thirty-five years as writer and as critic I've wondered if the short story may not be fantastic literature's natural form, if in fact we might not best limn these alternate worlds of which we're so enamored, best adumbrate them, in synecdoche. Basically it's the Chekhovian versus the Tolstoyan approach: educe these worlds entire, or sketch them, evoke them, from the glint of moonlight off a

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broken bottle, footprints on the beach, one episode from a single life.

At novel length, paradoxically, it seems to me, the literature of the fantastic can prove self-limiting, cart dragging horse, hooves in the air, along. The author gets swept up and along by the very reach of his or her enterprise. Having patched together this bold new world from straw, mud, and keen intelligence, the novelist's all too often left with but two possible outcomes: the world must be destroyed, or it must be returned at length (after 300 pages, after 780, after three brick-like volumes) to some implicit status quo. Lashing themselves to the mast for short passage, stories are able to sail past. They present that same bold new world in cross-section; elude disfiguring G-forces that pull toward plot, theme, and scope; retain close hold on character, social interaction, moral consequence.

Here, we have collections from two writers with much in common. Terry Bisson and Neal Barrett alike earn the bulk of their living from novels, yet remain committed to the short story. With notable exceptions, their novels have been commercially driven piecework, such as space operas written for $1000 paperback-original advances on Barrett's part, novelizations of movies and the like on Bisson's. Bisson's recent books include a *GalaxyQuest* novelization and completing the unfinished sequel to Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz;* his story and homonymous collection *Bears Discover Fire* have become classics. On Barrett's populous bench are the classic novel *The Hereafter Gang, Through Darkest America,* and a series of fine mysteries. Draw up anybody's list of the best sf stories being written today and both their names will be on it, probably more than once.

The stories of Terry Bisson's *In the Upper Room,* for all their clowning and literary mugging, and in a culture shamelessly pandering to youth, are stories for grown-ups, stories concerned with loss, with what has passed from us and shortly will, stories that try to recapture a world where things made sense.

In "There Are No Dead," for instance, men whose lives have gone fatally astray are able to return to childhood and begin again, endlessly. Written in straight dialog — a mode for which Bisson has a penchant — and seemingly light-hearted, the stone brilliant "Smoother" says in five pages everything about change and our acceptance of it that

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can be said. "Dead Man's Curve," "The Edge of the Universe," and "Get Me to the Church on Time" are all very funny stories about averting the sort of cataclysmic change that's forever moving toward us glacierlike (as in "Smoother") or waiting to fall like a grand piano from above, about returning to things as they were.

There's another element of conservatism here as well. Bisson's humor bypasses what may well be the dominant tone of our time — irony, with its assumptions of futility, of apartness — for older comic forms predicated upon potential and potency. Charmingly, Bisson's stories derive from a conceit that mankind, even if in ways we can never understand, exerts direct and defining influence on the world. In one story, the end of the universe is averted by the protagonist's striking a 2x4 against a beaded car seat; in another, universe's end gets ushered in by the snuffing-out of a million-year-old flame which is, essentially, the Logos. Here and elsewhere, Bisson's stories remind me of lines from one of Mark Levine's poems, where "the stars begin to fall, and though everybody is waiting/for a terrible surprise, it hasn't come yet, not just yet."

Charmingly, too, because like all great storytellers and salesmen, Bisson is a con man. He talks you in, soothes you with his voice, gets your confidence up before unloading his bag of goods. Never a second thought as you walk down the hallway, avuncular arm on your shoulder, these amazing tales spilling into your ear. Just so, everything here starts off believably enough — coming home at long last to Brooklyn with Southern girlfriend in tow, listening to Coltrane, putting in another routine day at the office or relaxing after one — and by the time things *do* turn strange, when Bisson just out of sight tweaks the quotidian half a turn south, the hook's well sunk.

Reminding us that American literature's greatness lies firmly rooted in the regional and comic, Bisson's voice is unmistakable. The final, realist story, "Not This Virginia," tells of siblings taking a mother with Alzheimer's out for a Sunday drive. Here at the end of this book filled with strange stories, protagonists must negotiate an ordinary world that has itself gone, for one of them, terminally strange. The story seems a perfect tag for Bisson's writing, as does his description of "one of the first fax machines" from "The Edge of the Universe":

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About the size of an upright piano, and not entirely electrical, it sat in the far corner of the office, against a wall where it was vented to the alley through a system of stovepipe and flex hose. I had always been reluctant to look behind its plywood sides, or under its duraluminum hood, but I understood from Hoppy (who had been called in once to fix it) that its various components were powered by an intricate and never since duplicated combination of batteries and 110, clockwork, gravity, water pressure, propane, and charcoal (for the thermal printer). No one knew who had made it, or when.

In Terry Bisson's mind, I think, that's a perfect description of the universe in which he and his characters find themselves. It's weird, and it works — more or less.

Neal Barrett's voice is not only unmistakable; you realize after a sentence or two that it's been there all along at the back of your head. Like Bisson, he perpetuates a great tradition of American regionalist and comic writing. His humor, though, is darker, more recondite.

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Bisson's introduction to *Perpetuity Blues* reflects the awe in which other writers hold Neal Barrett. Turn over any rock in Texas, as we all know, and you'll find a great writer. Brad Denton, Joe Lansdale, the incredible Howard Waldrop. Saints' names. None more saintly than Neal Barrett, who, I swear, if he has written a bad line in his life, slipped it past me.

Just as with Bisson's, Barrett's stories concern themselves with loss: loss of youth, loss of faith, loss of a world that makes sense, loss of worlds entire. He charms us, draws

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us in, tells a folksy joke or two — then, still smiling, jerks the rug out from under. In "Stairs" and "Under Old New York," women struggle to stay afloat in worlds where everything seems fatally exhausted, sinking, dying. "Highbrow" depicts a society so lacking in vitality that its entire economy is subsumed in building a monument to its hero, to the frozen past. At its heart a kind of symbolist poem, an almost but finally ungraspable fable, the story functions also as a satire of Marxist thought and of our own atomized, expand-or-expire society, beautifully demonstrating Barrett's conceptual brilliance and lapidary execution.

He has a genius for coming at stories obliquely, for writing from the inside, as though the story itself came out of the very society it depicts. This is never more apparent than in "Diner" with its Texas gulf setting, deadly grasshoppers, and absentee Chinese landlords. Others like "Ginny Sweethips' Flying Circus," though still charcoal-dark, are more purely adventure stories. There are also two exemplary Westerns here, "Sallie C." with its indelible images of Pat Garrett, the Wright brothers and Billy the Kid, and of the Desert Fox as a child in quite another desert; and "Winter on the Belle Fourche," wherein frail, determined Emily Dickinson sails off into the wilderness and back to cloistered Amherst much the richer for it.

Another element of Barrett's genius lies in his grafting of standard science-fictional themes to rigorously realistic characters and settings. As John Clute points out in a scifi.com review, Barrett knows all the standard moves of science fiction, knows them so well and is so easy with them that he feels free to sidestep them at will, to play with them, sashay in close for a *pas de deux* and then go spinning away again. He writes, Clute says, "with a vertiginous, onrushing, superbly controlled, stomping intensity. And he is utterly ruthless in his understanding that the world we are now entering is downward from America."

Again: stories for adults, sent out from a rigorously individual, uncompromising vision. Splice into that the fact of Barrett's working in a field at the margins of approbation and you begin to understand his relative obscurity in favor of writers unworthy to fetch from the mailbox and carry to him the $100 checks he probably got for these stories.

As I've said, Neal Barrett is

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incapable of writing a bad sentence, a bad line — or anything other than an outstanding story. Here is the opening of "Sallie C.":

> Will woke every morning covered with dust. The unfinished chair, the dresser with peeling paint, were white with powdery alkali. His quarters seemed the small back room of some museum, Will and the dresser and the chair, an exhibit not ready for public view. Indian John had built the room, nailing it to the hotel wall with the style and grace of a man who'd never built a thing in all his life and never intended to do it again. When he was finished, he tossed the wood he hadn't used inside and nailed the room firmly shut and threw his hammer into the desert.

Night falls, my friends. But as it comes inexorably down, sit with me here by the lowering fire for a spell and listen. Not to words shored against the ruins, but to words which are themselves a *part* of the ruins. Therein their beauty. Therein, too, what remains of, what still can propel, our small acts of heroism. Those bits of magic and mystery that will not quit our world or selves.

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Albert Cowdrey made himself a lot of new fans when he turned his talents to science fiction—his novella "Crux" in our March issue was very well received. Here he ventures back to the same milieu: a period several centuries from now, when much has changed and yet the human desire for power remains the same.

Mr. Cowdrey lives in New Orleans and thinks these tales of Ulanor will ultimately link to form a novel.

Mosh

By Albert E. Cowdrey

HER MAID GAVE A LAST TUG to Xian Xi-Qing's robes of faux silk and rolled away. Stiffly seated on a throne of pale poured marble, the ancient Controller stared down the long hall and tried to resemble a goddess without feeling much like one.

Once she had actually felt unshakable, but no longer. The Crux conspiracy had frightened her badly. Fanatics, invading the past to prevent the Time of Troubles, the disaster that created the present world. Who could have believed it?

Her tiny hands clutched each other, stilling a tremor. Ah, thought Xian, what good is all this stem-cell replacement therapy if you lose your courage, if you age inside? I never used to feel I needed protectors. But now...have I found the man to protect me, protect our world?

Goldleafed doors at the end of the hall swung open and a tall, heavy man of Japanese ancestry strode forward, each step covering a precise meter of polished floor. Two Darksiders slouched behind him, spreading a stink that nine censers burning faux ambergris could not cover.

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Yamashita halted, bowed. His face was like a brick, his head like sandpaper. The huge, ill-smelling, heavily armed beasts looked over his back, ready to destroy him or anybody else if Xian gave the kill signal. But she said only, "Rise, Honored Chief of Security."

With his friend the Worldsaver, this man had destroyed Crux. He was the logical candidate for the job, and yet.... His predecessor had betrayed her. She'd attended the faithless Kathmann's *shosho,* his interrogation, though she hated the stinks and screaming of the White Chamber. With the needles in his spine he'd confessed everything — the Chief of Security a traitor!

She'd heard him with her own ears, and though she would never admit it to anyone, at that moment fear had become her companion.

"General, extraordinary measures of security are needed," she began her instructions to Yamashita. "We trust the Space Service to deal with unfriendly aliens; they're quite insignificant. But here at home, ah here at home...."

Her hands were trembling again. "Suppose someone builds another wormholer?" she almost pleaded. "We know now that it's possible; we know that terrorists exist ready to destroy themselves if they can destroy this world of ours! Can we ever be secure again?"

Yamashita needed his *marmolitz,* his marble face. He'd expected a mere formal welcome to his new job. And here the Controller was demanding an answer to an unanswerable question.

Luckily, he was quick-witted.

"Honored Controller," he intoned, "I have given this problem much thought."

He paused — gave it the only thought he'd ever given it — then continued, "There is only one way. A new wormholer must be built under the control of the Security Forces. Reliable people must be trained to journey through time."

He paused, astonished at his own chutzpah, then thundered, "The Security Forces must police time itself! Only in this way can our world be secure!"

Xian thought: What a marvelous bureaucrat. Imagine, working all this out ahead of time, then demanding such an immense responsibility, knowing what will happen to him if he fails!

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She looked with new confidence into his face, seemingly impervious to heat, cold and pity. She nodded, extending a hand so thin the fingers looked like tiny sticks from a bird's nest. A magpie's nest, each finger stacked with glinting rings of dull gold and green jade.

"Your proposal is approved. Succeed, General, and three hundred inhabited worlds will praise you. Fail — "

She let the word hang in midair, as Kathmann had hung toward the end of his interrogation, when the skills of Colonel Yost and the technicians of the White Chamber had made his treason clear. Then she said abruptly, "Honored Chief of Security, we permit you to go."

In his big new office, Yamashita grinned boyishly. He yawned, broke wind, sprawled back in a tall chair of black duroplast. His thick fingers drummed on the desktop, a massive slab of Martian petrified wood, a hundred million years old if it was a day.

He was thinking: What the fuck. I deserve all this.

Thirty years it had taken him to get here. Thirty years since those far-off days in the Security Forces Academy when he revealed his ambition to his friend, Cadet Steffens Aleksandr.

"You watch me, Stef. One day I'll be the fucking Chief of Security."

"Why would you want to be?"

A typical Stef answer. The man who had become a cop without believing the basic truths of cophood.

"Because, asshole, that's where the power is."

"And the problems. And the danger of losing your head."

Yamashita smiled, stretched. Stef had gone on to become the Worldsaver, more or less by accident. By plunging into the past to destroy Crux he had also become dead. But his pal Yama was alive in the present, and just where he wanted to be.

"Secretary!" he barked. Obediently, a large mashina whose memory was stocked with the world's most elaborate encryption software rose from a well in the floor.

"Yes, Honored General?"

"Get me Yost."

An instant later a prickle of laser beams created the illusion of a long, sad-looking, intellectual face hovering in the mashina's shadowbox.

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"I'm officially in. So here's a few things for you to get started on. First, find the White Chamber new quarters. It's too small and the electrical system is antiquated. Also, change its name. It's got a lousy reputation. Call it, um, Special Investigations."

"You aren't abolishing *shosho*?" asked Yost, alarmed.

"Great Tao, no." Neither man could imagine running a proper criminal justice system without physical methods.

"Oh, and another thing. Xian wants us to build a new wormholer. Kathmann executed the guys who built the last one, so you'll have to assemble a new team. We'll need young, strong, expendable people to do the time traveling. It's no game for old farts."

"Chief, this is all damned expensive. Where's the money to come from?"

"Don't worry, I know where a lot of bodies are buried. I'll squeeze the Senate. But for a start, we can economize. The budget of the Penal Moons is way out of line. Release all offenders who've served ten years or more if they're fully rehabilitated. Execute those who aren't."

"Will do."

No order bothered Yost. He'd survived Kathmann and intended to survive Yamashita as well.

"In case anybody complains about any of my policies," Yamashita finished, "you're the designated motherfucker, understand? I set people free while you cut off heads. I abolish the White Chamber while you run Special Investigations. When you follow me into this office, you can mistreat your deputy the way I intend to mistreat you. Understood?"

"Yes, Honored General," sighed Yost, and his image evaporated.

Yamashita reared back in his chair and the boyish grin returned to his usually stolid face. He was going to enjoy his new job. A little *mosh* — power in Alspeke, the only language that all humans understood — was a pain in the butt. Ask poor old Yost.

But a lot was heaven.

On the nearby campus of the University of the Universe, a knot of students gathered in the warm Siberian sun around a kiosk plastered with job announcements.

"Great Tao," said one. "Timesurfing. How's that for a job?"

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"Tailbuster," said another. "Beta test scores, alfa fitness, SECRET/BEHEADER clearance!"

Most of them drifted on. One who didn't was a tall, solid-looking young man who took a notebook from his beltpouch and read the announcement's boxcode into it.

"Gonna apply, Maks?" asked another.

"Why not? Nothing to lose."

Hastings Maks would not have dreamed of admitting how excited he felt. He loved history, loved finding out how things really happened. To explore the actual past sounded too good to be true.

And to do it under the leadership of General Yamashita — the security chief who'd gained everyone's love by closing the White Chamber and opening the doors of the prisons. Why, hardly a day went by without the news programs showing some tearful ex-convict returning home to his weeping family. Nobody in Ulanor the Worldcity was more popular than this strong man, who kept society in order through justice, not cruelty!

Next morning Maks woke up and faced reality. He was not exceptional in any way, mental or physical, and the likelihood that he could get into an elite program was small.

But he was bold enough to defy the odds. Sheer grit would have to substitute for special talents. He called the boxcode from his parents' mashina and registered for the first test — a grueling athletic trial called the *Fizikál.*

For the next month he was up before dawn every morning, working out in the campus gymnasium with the young men and women who would be his competitors. He deliberately chose the best of them to test himself against — for wrestling, a strong young Mongol with the torso of a lion; for running, a woman offworlder named Zo Lian.

Lian was definitely odd. Though human, she'd been genetically adjusted to her homeworld, Beta Charonis; her bones looked almost delicate but her muscles were long, tireless strings. Her chest — intended for use in air with a lower oxygen content than Earth — was a barrel; her breasts small, bound for exercise by an elastic bandage.

Lian told Maks that the only thing remarkable about her planet, aside from its rich lodes of metals and natural radioactives, was the fact that the ill-smelling, ferocious creatures called Darksiders came from there.

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"When I arrived on Earth and saw a platoon of them guarding the Palace of Justice with whips and guns," she said wryly, "I felt at home right away."

Ambitious, she'd worked her way to Earth on a freighter, won a stipend to study at the University, then applied for the surfer program. Maks found her too strange to be desirable, but he admired her guts and her prowess as an effortless, tireless runner. If he could keep up with Lian, he could keep up with anybody.

After working out in the gym, they put on thin coveralls with cooling units and set out, running through the outskirts of the city and up the dry Butaeliyn Hills in the metallic dust of summer. Invariably, Lian led the way, Maks puffing behind with the heels of her ragged old running shoes flickering like little mirages ahead of him.

One day after a ten or twelve-click run they stopped to rest and drink at a cold spring. In the shade of bent pines Maks sank down, all his muscles quivering, his lungs burning as he gasped for air. Even Lian had found the long uphill run tough; she propped her skinny arms against her knees, lungs working like bellows.

When her racing pulse had quieted she walked unsteadily to the spring and knelt down. Maks joined her and they drank side by side like two weary animals. Then sat quietly on the ground and looked at each other.

Lian had a laconic, flat way of talking.

"We'll both get into the program," she predicted. "I'll make the first cut and you'll make the second or third."

"You know, you've got just the slightest touch of arrogance, Lian."

She plucked a stalk of dun grass and thoughtfully picked her long white teeth. At such moments she looked subtly unhuman, all her proportions just a trifle off the earthside norm. The fact that she had amber eyes heightened the near-alien effect.

"Not really. I'm smarter and quicker than you are, that's just a fact. But I've watched you almost kill yourself working out, Maks. You'll make it on guts alone."

That was the most encouraging thing he'd heard yet. As his breathing quieted, scenes from the past formed in his mind. He saw China's First Emperor dip his writing brush to order the building of the Great Wall. He

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saw a troop of Crusaders ride down a dusty road in Anatolia, chain mail chinking like a pocketful of half-khan pieces. He saw naked whores dancing in the Red Room of the White House while one of the Decadent Presidents looked on, grinning and munching toasted pork rinds.

The past, the incomparable past, made up of so many presents forever lost, now regained.

Suddenly his fatigue was gone. Like a boy he took out his excitement by jumping Lian. For a few seconds they rolled over and over in the dust like playful puppies. This was one place where Maks's weight mattered; he found himself astride her, pressing her whip-thin arms to the dust. Her strange eyes stared up at him, bright as burning amber.

Embarrassed, he jumped up, helped her to her feet. They brushed each other off.

"Timesurfing — it's the only life, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes," said Lian, "there is no other," and began to trot down the mountain, leading the way as usual.

THAT SAME SUMMER — not that Earth's seasons meant anything in the tunnels of the penal moon Calisto — Convict Ya7326 prepared for the end of his term of imprisonment.

Sentenced for life, he now had a chance to be set free after only twenty years. Like all the men and women who dwelt in the tunnels, he was bald and muscular. Convicts were routinely depilated for hygienic reasons, and work at the Near Space Refueling Depot, for which the penal colony supplied labor, made you either strong or dead.

Inwardly Ya7326 was exceptionally intelligent, though his prison jobs as cleanup man, oiler, and subtechnician at the liquid nitrogen storage tanks had given him little chance to prove it.

As the "day" approached (days were marked by fluctuations in the automatic lighting) he seemed absolutely unaware of the coming change. Until a robot guard called him to the Out-Processing Unit, he continued to make up his bunk, work in the tunnels, eat every mouthful of food allowed him — in short, to obey each and every one of the 92 Rules of Conduct he'd learned on arrival.

After receiving a total radial scan to make sure he wouldn't carry

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diseases back to civilization, he reported to the psychiatrist's office. He sat down on a battered duroplast bench and waited without fidgeting. Memories passed through his mind.

His arrest and his time in the White Chamber would be with him as long as he lived. He'd run an identity-counterfeiting ring connected with the *mafya* and had spent a long time with the needles in his spinal marrow, screaming and twisting, his back arching until he felt it must break.

Then General Kathmann had entered the room — a short man with a fat neck, pointed head, and glinting plastic eyes. He sounded impatient as he said to the techs, "You've got all the juice out of this *kukrach*. Don't waste any more time on him."

Kukrach meant cockroach.

So he survived the White Chamber and became Ya7326 and traveled to Calisto in a freighter's hold. There things got rough again. He still remembered the blinding headache that followed insertion of his control chip and the little explosive sphere of synthetic neurotoxin. Then later in his cell, trying despite the headache to memorize the Rules of Conduct.

Breaking any of the first 12 (lack of neatness in the cell, failure of personal hygiene, etc.) brought punishment by hunger. Breaking the next 21 meant hunger plus sensory deprivation for longer or shorter periods. Breaking any of the other 59 rules brought death, which was so easy: a program running on the mainframe in Central Control reviewed the guard reports, assigned or deleted quality points, sent a signal, and a prisoner keeled over, untouched by human hands.

At first Ya7326 couldn't believe the prison authorities were serious, that there could be so many reasons to die. Then they began culling the new prisoners. First to go were the double-Y-chromosome types. He was glad of that — scary guys, good riddance. Then the incurably disruptive. A woman convict who threw washwater on a robot guard in an attempt to short it out went down like a poleaxed cow within a meter of him and the guard dragged her away by the ankles.

Yet Ya7326 had survived the culling, too. Why? he often asked himself. Was he reserved for some great destiny? Life in the tunnels gave him endless time to think about such profound and basic questions.

A light blinked above the door and Ya7326 got up, neither hurrying nor lagging even though he knew that for him, the critical moment was

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at hand. If he was judged rehabilitated, he would go free. If the psychiatrist penetrated his most profound thoughts, he would die like that woman, even now, even after twenty years.

"Well," the psychiatrist greeted him, "I see we have another candidate for release. Why should we set you free, Ya7326?"

"I feel that I'm ready to regain my freedom. Suffering has purified my inner self. I've had no demerits at all for the past five years."

The psychiatrist — a black box — checked his record and confirmed his claims.

"That is very satisfactory, Ya7326. Your cell sensors report no rulebreaking activities of any kind, and that is also good. Have you reflected on the errors that brought you to Calisto?"

"Yes," he said, "I often think about those errors."

Now they were getting to the heart of the matter. For the interview Ya7326 sat in a *senzit*, a chair that monitored a variety of physical reactions. The *senzit* was part of the psychiatrist — its lap, maybe.

"Meditation on one's past mistakes is a prerequisite to sound action in the future," it intoned. "Do you agree?"

Ya7326 had often noticed that black boxes were even more tiresomely moralistic than humans.

"Emphatically, Doctor, I do agree."

"Do you blame yourself or others for your crime of counterfeiting identities?"

"I blame no one but myself."

"Very good," said the box, after checking his reactions. "Now, this is a question you will need to answer with perfect honesty. Your answer will be noted purely for medical purposes and will not be reported to the prison authorities."

Despite everything, he felt increased tension that he knew the box was reading from the *senzit*. Of course it was lying — everything would be reported.

"Do you desire revenge against the authorities who subjected you to *shosho* and later sent you to prison?"

Ya7326 took a few seconds to compose himself.

"Let me be precise," he said. "I admit to hating General Kathmann, who ordered my *shosho*. But he's dead. I have no desire whatever to

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become the kind of contemptible criminal I used to be. I don't want to harm any human individual."

A few silent seconds passed. Then the psychiatrist said, "Your involuntary reactions and brainwave patterns, Ya7326, indicate that you have spoken the truth as you see it. It can therefore be said that your rehabilitation is complete."

Next day Ya7326 was sitting on the examining table in the dispensary, waiting for the surgeon to appear. A locked instrument cabinet stood in front of him; he looked at his reflection in the mirror duroplast and smiled, thinking of the psych interview. How stupid black boxes were!

No, he had no desire to commit again the acts he'd been convicted of. If he had to commit them in furtherance of his plan, he would. But he had no *desire* to.

Yes, he blamed himself for being such a fool as to imperil his godlike self for the trivial rewards of petty crime. No, he wanted no revenge on any human *individual.*

He turned as the door opened. The surgeon bustled in, washed his hands at a little sink on the wall, and prepared for business.

"Had your mediscan?"

"Yes, sir."

"Psych interview?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ready to go, then?"

"Definitely, sir."

"Lie on your stomach. This will hurt a little, even with the local anesthetic — the back of the neck has so many nerves in it."

"I don't mind pain," said Ya 7326, truthfully.

During imprisonment his pain threshold had risen so high that he could hold his fingers in an open flame, smelling the flesh burn but feeling hardly a sting. It was part of the transition he'd undergone in the tunnels, an aspect of his entry into a new kind of being.

"Cut away," he said, and closed his eyes.

The first day of the *Fizikál* was devoted to gymnasium sports. Maks got along well enough, and Lian did splendidly until the candidates paired off for wrestling.

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Then the powerful young Mongol who used to wrestle (and invariably throw) Maks sprang into the circle with Lian, seized her around her slender waist and with one violent contraction of the arms broke her back.

Maks, horrified, rode with Lian to the hospital. A few centuries in the past so serious a spinal cord injury would have meant permanent paralysis. Now it meant an operation to replace the damaged section with nerve fibers from genetically altered embryo monkeys. Then it meant lying in bed for months, waiting for the regeneration to be complete, followed by more months of therapy to restore full function.

Maks paid as many visits to Lian as he could. But the first year of the timesurfer program — he'd barely made the third cut after screwing up a math exam — was especially arduous, designed to weed out anybody who couldn't take it. When Maks did visit the hospital he felt guilty to be talking about his progress.

"Now they're taping me with archaic English," he said. "It's pretty easy; after all, I know the modern dialect. At least I get a chance to sleep while the mashina's on. Aside from that it's run, run, run all the time."

Lian sighed. As of today she'd been looking at the ceiling of the hospital room for seventy-three days. She knew every crack in the paint by heart.

"It'll take me forever to get back in shape," she muttered.

"I'll help you."

"You're a dear friend, Maks, but you won't have time."

That was true. The harder truth was that Lian's injury made things easier for Maks. One competitor less — and a tough one, at that.

"It's just something that can't be helped," Lian added.

Lying in bed she looked pale and yellowish. Her face had gone wan and ascetic and her normally thin body was a sack of bones. Maks was sitting in a chair by the bed, sleek with muscles, glowing with health.

"Well, I'll be back as soon as I can," he said. He pressed her hand, and it felt like a fossil.

Maks meant what he said, but in fact he did not go back to the hospital. He was too busy. The place was too depressing. People his age were not supposed to be left broken and helpless. He felt guilty about not going, but not guilty enough to go. Instead, he celebrated his twentieth

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birthday with his first trip through the wormholer — just a year to the day after the *Fizikál* that had been so disastrous for Lian.

Miniaturization had reduced the device to a cylinder encircled by two rings: the first held the gravitron accelerator, the second massive electromagnets wrapped with coils of superconductors cooled by liquid nitrogen to prevent meltdown when gigawatts of energy were poured in. Behind a shield, techs watched the monitors of the mashina that ran the show.

"Recite the Standing Order!" demanded Maklúan, a red-haired tech with an ugly face and an irritating manner.

"'The past is not to be changed in any manner, however slight. No one can tell what effect a change may have upon the present. If I have to choose between changing the past and destroying myself, I must destroy myself.'"

"Let's go then. I don't have all day."

Carrying a small hand control to signal for his return, Maks relaxed and listened to the hum of the metal slide that carried him into the cylinder. He adjusted opaque goggles over his eyes to prevent retinal damage, and felt rather than saw the intense flash of light that marked the Big Bang-like burst of photons created by the sudden torsion of spacetime.

He removed the goggles. He was lying on the floor of an empty room in the academy. He got up and noted the time recorded by the clock on the wall: 1534.6/7/2465. A year had been subtracted. The door of the "receiver room," as they called it, was locked and sealed shut to prevent accidental contacts between now and then. But a square window, said to be mirrored on the outside, gave him his first sight of the living past.

For long minutes he stared down with some unsayable emotion at the world of a year ago — then saw something that almost stopped his heart.

Lian, carrying a gym bag, was hurrying toward the *Fizikál*. Waiting for her, Maks knew, was the Mongol wrestler.

Suddenly Maks found himself beating on the window, trying to attract Lian's attention, trying to cry a warning. But she hastened past, disappeared from Maks's angle of vision. Maks put his face into his hands. More time passed before he could pull himself together sufficiently to press the control and return to his own time.

When Maklúan helped him out of the wormholer, he was still pale

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and shaken. With a superior smile on his ugly face, the tech remarked, "Assholes never learn."

One sandy eyebrow was raised; the tech seemed to be enjoying some joke that he alone understood. Maks suddenly realized that the path to the gym didn't go anywhere near the receiver room.

The "window" hadn't been a window at all; the scene had been a mashina-generated image. In an instant his grief turned to blinding rage.

"You fucking bastard," he gasped. "I ought to kill you."

"If you do," the tech said coolly, "you'll never be a timesurfer. Incidentally, this was a test. You flunked it."

Maks stared at him, his hands clasping and unclasping. Then he slammed out of the room.

For the whole of the ten-day week that followed, Maks waited to hear he'd been plowed in. But nobody said anything; gradually he began to breathe again. Maybe, he thought, you were expected to fail the first time.

Nevertheless, the experience had reminded him of Lian. One evening he looked her up. Since her discharge from the hospital, Lian had been living in a dormitory for offworld students at the University. The room, painted sickish green, was crowded with six folding beds and fragrant with moldy towels.

But Lian was looking better, as if the environment didn't touch her. She smiled, tried to make Maks welcome. She wore shapeless overalls that sagged as if there was no body inside.

"I've started exercising again, but it's tough," she admitted. "I run half a click and get winded. Still, I'm hoping to apply again in the fall."

You'll never make it, thought Maks, somehow forgetting that he had succeeded by grit alone.

"I wish you luck," he said and put on what he hoped was an encouraging smile. He took her hands and squeezed them; if she hadn't looked so...odd, he would have kissed her, out of sheer pity.

Ulanor, the Worldcity, the capital of the human species, the arena where people struggled for boundless wealth and *mosh*, was blasé about visitors, even important ones. Heroes of the alien wars in Far Space returned to find themselves forgotten; offworld senators were ignored.

Perhaps no visitor had ever been as thoroughly overlooked as the

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former Ya7326. He reached Luna as he'd left it, in a freighter's hold. He dozed in the shuttle port until an empty seat came up and he could be thumbed aboard.

But at least he arrived back in the city of his birth carrying a passport with his convict ID exed out. He was now Vray Dak, the name under which he'd been arrested two decades before.

His first duty was to report to the polizi in the ziggurat Palace of Justice and sign in, giving his current address. Then he spent an hour walking the hard, polished corridors, gazing at carved dragons and snarling lion-dogs and quotations from the Great Unifier of Humankind, Genghis Khan. Such as: "He who breaks my law will vanish like an arrow among reeds."

A recovered arrow, he ventured downstairs, the level of the former White Chamber. Now it held the offices of a small Security Forces agency. When a guard frowned at him, Vray apologized and departed.

He loitered for a time outside the building, standing by a trirad stand so that he'd seem to be waiting for a vehicle if anybody challenged him. In fact, nobody did — he was a casual, slouching figure, a bit overweight as a result of gorging himself on non-prison food. The only remarkable thing about him was his wig, cheap and often askew, that gave his head a faintly comic appearance. Some passersby smiled at him, and he smiled back.

Next day he found a legitimate job with the Water and Waste Monopoly, operating an autominer similar to the ones used on Calisto. He worked there patiently until he no longer had to report to the polizi. By then he'd made contact with some other graduates of what the underworld called *Kalist'akad*, Calisto Academy. With mafya help, he quit his job and entered the city's trade in stolen goods.

He was cool and cunning and seemed to draw on boundless supplies of energy, going sometimes for four or five days without sleep. A year of effort made him fairly prosperous.

With money in his pocket, he adopted new hobbies. He obtained a portable holographer, bought a license and began to appear on streets around Ulanor, taking people's pictures against projected 3D backdrops for a silver half-khan. One of his favorite posts was outside the Palace of Justice.

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"So," said a guard who recognized him. "Got a new line?"

"Yes, sir. In business for myself, you see."

"Lemme see your license."

The license checked out. Rather reluctantly — he would have liked to run the bugger in, on general principles — the guard returned it to him.

"Quit your job digging sewers?"

"Well, sir, after you've lived underground for twenty years, it's nice to work where you can see the sky."

"Making a living?"

"Scraping by, sir."

"Well...watch your ass."

"Always, sir."

By offering free samples, Vray managed to capture the likeness of a number of civilian employees of the small agency that occupied the former White Chamber. Then he disappeared from the street.

If anyone had been interested, they might have found him at home in an apartment he'd rented in the Clouds and Rain District — the redlight district, named for a poetic Chinese description of intercourse, the "play of clouds and rain."

He spent much of his time staring at a stolen mashina he'd kept for his own use. He was studying an interactive book called *The Glorious Language: Archaic English for Beginners*. He read history, everything he could find on the 21st Century, and mythology, memorizing stories of forgotten gods. He was fascinated by a book called *America in Decline: The Decadent Presidents*, enough so that he and the prosts at the cheap brothels he frequented tried out some of the games the decadent presidents had played.

Vray Dak had become a successful minor criminal, an autodidact and a self-made bore. That was how they knew him in the District; outside it, few people knew him at all.

Lian had astonished Maks by passing the entrance test, including the *Fizikál*, though just barely — thirty-six candidates were admitted and her class number was thirty-five. But that was only the beginning.

Slowly she'd made her way forward. At the end of her first year she stood twenty-first in a class that resignations and failures had reduced to

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twenty-nine. In her second year, Lian cracked the midpoint: twelfth out of twenty-four.

When she came to Maks's graduation, she was almost unrecognizable: a third-year student, confident of her future, marked out from her classmates only by her strange physique and amber eyes. Her class standing was now sixth out of twenty. Maks's final standing had been seventeenth in his own class of nineteen men and women.

"You see," Lian told him at the end of Maks's graduation ceremony, when they embraced amid a crowd of well-wishers.

"If you hadn't been injured," Maks admitted, "my class standing would've been eighteenth."

"That's true, it would have been."

Maks laughed helplessly at this blunt immodesty. But it was hard to be offended by the truth. After three years of training Lian made him think of a steel string on some strange instrument, perfectly tuned, perfectly taut.

She still didn't attract him, but she fascinated him. In spite of everything — her injury, her offworld birth, her poverty — he could see now that she was one of fate's darlings, possessing a bit more of every talent than most people could ever have or hope for.

"Lian," he said honestly, "I'm lucky to know you."

"Yes, my dear friend," she answered gravely, "you are."

ON HIS POSTGRADUATION leave Maks took a girlfriend to Antartica for the summer skiing. On his return he reported to the grim step-pyramid of the Palace of Justice and entered, brushing past a fleshy man in a wig to reach the guard station.

Pastplor, the Office for the Exploration of the Past, had been operating for only five years — the new kid on the bureaucratic block, distrusted by the uniformed thuggi whose idea of policing did not include time travel.

Maks had Pastplor's status forcefully brought home to him when he realized that its offices were on the first level underground, in space formerly occupied by the White Chamber of infamous memory.

Searching for the right room, he walked down soundproofed corridors lined with small tiled cubicles and an occasional larger room. The steel

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doors were gone and desks had taken the place of metal tables with electrical attachments and blood drains. The narrow punishment cells now imprisoned only brooms and mops, ceilings had been painted sky blue, and there were no Darksiders about.

Yet Maks felt anxious and oppressed. He didn't need this atmosphere for his first day on the job.

Eventually — after asking twenty or so people and getting nineteen wrong answers — he found the room where his orientation was to take place. At once he relaxed. It was full of his friends and Maks forgot his first impressions of the place in happy gossip about how everyone had wasted the summer just past.

Then a black box at the front of the classroom beeped them to attention.

"What," it demanded, "are the Authorized Uses of the Past?"

The young surfers took out recorder disks, warmed them between their hands and started taking notes.

"The first," said the box, answering itself, "is to maintain everlasting vigil against criminals like the Crux conspirators.

"The second, newly imposed by the Controller herself, is to reach practical solutions to questions of scientific importance."

Maks now learned that weather stations the size of grains of sand had been sent to a variety of times and locations to build up a reliable picture of temperature variations for the last 100,000 years. These tiny globules stuffed with nanomachines were unlikely to be spotted by baffled *stari* (the old ones, the people of former ages). They were also cheap to send and recover, and that was important: the biggest item on Pastplor's budget was energy. In time the globules would yield the finest database ever assembled on the world's weather, its past and probable future.

"The final Authorized Use," the atonal voice went on, "is to investigate the origins of the Time of Troubles. This great catastrophe — the war of 2091, the Two Year Winter, and the Nine Plagues — created our world; we can hardly learn too much about it. You, young ladies and gentlemans, will find in these endeavors your lifeworks.

"You must, however, be aware of the danger. Last year a surfer was sent — at the cost of a gigawatt of energy, chargeable to this agency's budget — to the Imperial Chinese People's Republic in 2041. A defective

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accent in Archaic Mandarin gave him away and he was arrested as a spy. His control device was taken from him before he could use it to escape, and when we attempted to recover him we got instead an officer of the Imperial People's Liberation Army. Interrogation of this officer revealed that your poor young colleague died while undergoing a torture called 'the points,' which I will not describe as you might find it too distressing.

"Remember that past times may be dangerous," the black box concluded solemnly, and dismissed them for lunch.

Maks followed his friends to an underground cafeteria filled with the clash and rattle of trays and people yelling at each other to be heard above the din.

"What fiendish torture, young ladies and gentlemans, was the captured Chinese officer compelled to undergo?" demanded a class comic, mimicking the blank, flat tones of the black box.

"The points?" asked Maks.

"No. He was forced to eat this soyloaf."

Everybody groaned in sympathy with the victim.

"You're getting beautiful," said the woman with whom Vray Dak had finally settled down. To the polizi she was a registered prost, but that only proved the headquarters supermashini were behind the times.

Getting too old to live by whoring, she'd gone to a school that billed itself as the Academy of Beauty and turned herself into a skilled cosmetician. Now she earned her living from the brothels in a new way, making up the inmates for their evening work. In one of the houses she'd met Vray.

He was rather proud of the fact that he'd lost six kilos lately. Most of the flab he'd added as a free man was now gone; his hairless body was sleek as a fish.

"Yet I have to lose a bit more," he said.

"Why? I like you the way you are."

"I have to get down to about seventy kilos before Great Genghis Day."

"Why?"

"If you don't stop asking questions, I'll kill you."

An odd duck, she thought. He talked about losing weight and killing in exactly the same tone of voice.

She looked at him narrowly. She was seventy, well into middle age,

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and she hadn't been a beauty even when young. She had never quite understood what he saw in her, a younger man with good connections in the *mafya.*

"Loki, my love, I won't ask even one more," she promised.

That was the name he preferred to be called. He said it was connected to his religion. He smiled, and she nestled into the crook of his arm.

"Oh, incidentally," he said.

"Yes?"

"I want you to get me some things. A new wig, some contact lenses. And I'll need you to make me up for a job."

Ah, she thought, so that's what he sees in me. But she was a realist; she not only didn't resent his making use of her, she was glad of it. It was another bond between them.

"Whatever you want, my dear," she said, and soon — his body reacting as it usually did to submissive words and acts — she had her reward.

Maks's first year as a surfer turned out to be frustrating, then infuriating. Instead of surfing, he found himself turning into a glorified technician and button-pusher.

People he knew went to the past, but not Maks. His own classmates returned to London, New York, Moscow. Then people from the next class started going. Even Lian: she had graduated number one at the academy and from her first day at Pastplor everyone treated her with respect. With a stab of envy, Maks realized that she was regarded by Colonel Yost as the agency's great hope for the future.

When Lian was picked to visit New York in 2025, Maks decided to complain. He asked for an appointment with Yost and was refused. Too angry to be scared, he went to the top: asked for an appointment with General Yamashita himself. Somewhat to his surprise, he was granted five minutes and for the first time entered the Security Forces' command suite, sixty meters down in the most secure part of the Palace of Justice.

The first thing he noticed was the ubiquity of Darksiders. Smelling atrociously, the huge beasts, with their four arms, thick-furred pelts, mandrill faces and red-amber eyes, seemed to stand at every corner of the long, zigzag marble corridor leading to Yamashita's den. Every one of

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them clanked in cartridge belts and fingered five-kilo impact weapons that looked like toys in their massive fists.

Sometimes in Pastplor Maks almost forgot that he was part of the Security Forces; down here, *mosh* in its nakedest form was on display everywhere.

A black box ordered him to stand at attention just outside the General's office, where he remained immobile, his nose itching devilishly, for twenty-seven minutes by a large wall clock. Then, just as abruptly, the box ordered him into the sanctum.

The big office was clean as a Zen temple, hard as a tomb. In the center reposed a wide empty desk like a frozen lake, a huge mashina, and Yamashita himself, a bemedaled monolith in a tall black chair.

"What the fuck do you want?"

That didn't sound promising. Maks had not been invited to stand at ease, so he stared at a far-off blank wall and spoke as much like a black box as he could.

"Sir, I've been a timesurfer for two years and have yet to be sent into the past. If I'm an asset, I deserve assignment like the others. If I'm not, I want to know it so I can resign and look for a meaningful job elsewhere."

"You wasted my time with this?"

"General, you can settle the rest of my life in two seconds. Nobody else can."

Considering that the room was cool, Maks was astonished to find himself sweating in so many different places. One large cold bead traveled down the furrow of his spine; he would have given anything to stop its ticklish progress.

Yamashita barked at his mashina, "Record of this T/S1 you gave the appointment to." Glancing at the record, he said, "Yost doesn't trust you because you fucked up on a test."

"Sir, I didn't know it was a test."

"Those are the only tests that matter. Do you want to stay with the program?"

More than I want to live, Maks almost said. But no, the general didn't deal in exaggerations.

"Very much, Sir."

"You'll be tested again. Now — out. I got work to do."

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Recovering his equanimity in a toilet outside the command suite, Maks thought with narrowed eyes of Maklúan, the red-haired tech who'd tricked him. The man now worked at Pastplor, and Maks had to see him almost every day. Maks wasn't a hater, but he made an exception for Maklúan.

Yamashita was as good as his word. New orders were received, and a few days later, in the company of Timesurfer Mogul Peshawar, Maks went back to Pastplor's offices as they had been just before the agency occupied them.

The outside doors were still sealed. The cells of the White Chamber stood empty, dark and abandoned. Some of the light switches worked, some didn't. With Mogul beside him, Maks walked the echoing corridors, observing and describing, his hand-held recorder disk growing slick with chilly sweat.

Dread invested everything. The thick cell doors, some covered on the inside with ratty carpet for added silence. The lingering smell of Darksiders. The graffiti in the holding cells, which he traced painfully under a light held by Mogul. Hundreds of dates, curses ("Fuck all thuggi"), questions ("Why am I here?"), prison names and boasts ("Red Pepper too tough, never break"), pleas ("Tell my wife Dzhimi still loves her"), despair ("Death call me").

"Why'd they send us here?" he whispered to Mogul.

"Still trying to toughen you up, I guess."

"I'm not a coward."

"No, you're just a sweet kid. Time travel's not for sweet kids."

While Mogul paused to take down an inscription that interested him, a seething Maks walked into what had certainly been a torture chamber. It was larger than most of the cells, and deep in shadow. His handlight showed nothing but the usual battered metal table, the dangling wires, the blood drains.

Skin crawling, he turned away. Then sensed a movement behind him.

He spun around to see an immense Darksider that seemed to have sprung out of the walls lurch toward him, swinging a huge spiked club over its head. He gasped, almost broke and ran out of the chamber, out of Pastplor, out of the whole goddamn business of dealing with the unspeakable past.

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Then, inside his head, he heard his father's voice say firmly *Once but not twice.* He stiffened, stared into the animal's red/black eyes. Realized suddenly what some deep part of his brain had already noted: He couldn't smell the Darksider.

Suddenly he began to laugh. As he did, the image broke up, dislimned, evaporated. Around the ceiling a prickle of tiny lights in laser projectors darkened.

Mogul dawdled into the chamber. "I guess we can go back now," he said.

BY COMPARISON WITH that test, Maks's first trip into what surfers called the "real past" was easy — at first.

He and Mogul went to Washington in 2052 and spent two weeks recording data in the Library of Congress. The aim was to discover America's role, if any, in bringing on the Time of Troubles.

For the first time Maks absorbed the sense of another age — the strange food, the metallic taste of polluted air, the babble of archaic words, the dizzying throngs on the streets. The *stari* were a strange bunch, with their odd hairstyles and odder clothes and their abrupt, informal manners. They talked about the Century When Everything Went Wrong, about the party strife paralyzing the government, about the Chinese ambassador's public remark that he no longer bought congressmen because renting them was cheaper. Cynicism was in style.

The picture he and Mogul assembled from documents confirmed popular opinion. The long-dominant American economy had stalled. The gigantic Chinese industrial machine ruthlessly outproduced and undersold all rivals. Nature had been merciless — California had been devastated by the worst earthquake in history, the nation's other rich coastal regions flooded by a sea rising faster than anyone had predicted. The whole insurance industry had gone under along with the coastline, and the stock market had followed.

As wealth declined, taxes soared and a small antitax rebellion in the West had been fanned by foolish policies into a major regional uprising, the first since the Civil War.

To Maks's surprise, the current President, Derrick Minh Smith, was

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a break from the long run of Decadent Presidents who disgraced the midcentury. Tough and able, he tried to suppress disorder while winning himself the nickname of The Peacemaker for his tireless efforts to avoid war with China. America seemed to have had nothing to do with fanning the rivalries that led to the Troubles.

Instead the picture was of a great nation undergoing slow internal decay. The library building was still ornately beautiful but falling apart for lack of upkeep. Carpets were worn, tiles displaced. The quaint toilets overflowed. Bits of glass fell from mosaics and tinkled on the marble floor as Maks walked by.

Outside, the summer heat was stifling and brownouts and blackouts increased the tumult of the nights. Some merchants refused to accept dollars, demanding good solid rubles instead. Programs on the tivis — crude and brainless mashini — touted "An Age of Gold: The Twentieth Century." Or the nineteenth. Or the eighteenth. Any time but now.

Toward the end of Maks's visit, the disorder began to hit home. Political parties had multiplied, fielding private armies of agitators and thugs who battled each other in the streets. Rioting over some incomprehensible issue broke out one evening and troops carrying big clumsy rifles and wearing primitive night-vision helmets trotted up to guard the library.

That evening the murmur of mobs sounded like summer thunder and fires glowed in the distance. Maks and Mogul climbed to the roof of their rooming house to watch. Odd-looking aircraft buzzed like big wasps, dropping an irritant gas that drifted with the wind and forced the two surfers to go to their room and sit there, sweating, with closed windows.

Next morning Mogul was too sick to work. During the day he got sicker, despite the so-called universal inoculations they'd had before leaving Ulanor. By the following day his condition had become so bad that Maks had to call for help; they were both returned early and immediately put into an isolation unit until the virus, an ancient and lethal form of influenza, could be identified and destroyed.

Maks got a promotion for saving Mogul's life. He'd done well in a simple assignment; other and better ones loomed. His time of waiting was over. He called the girl he'd taken to Antartica; her name was Maia; he

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hinted that he'd had great adventures, asked her to join him at Lake Bai for Great Genghis Day, and she agreed.

Suddenly his world looked rich indeed.

Great Genghis Day had expanded to a three-day midsummer holiday, and traditionally people went wild the first evening, which was called *pyatnit*, or Drunk Night. The second night was for the fireworks display and patriotic oratory about humanity's forward march. The third was for recovery, with a workday looming ahead.

In the Clouds and Rain District, the morning after *pyatnit* was celebrated with bloodshot eyes, headaches and hot cups of strong green tea. In the Four Seasons teahouse, however, a bore in a wig seemed to have no hangover at all. He was questioning a sleepy-looking man — pale-faced and red-haired — who'd spent the night in one of the cheaper brothels.

"So you're in time travel," said the bewigged one. "Tell me this: do you know what the basic factor of history is?"

"Don't ask me. As I told you, all I do is run the goddamn machine."

"Well, let me tell you, then. The basic factor is context."

"No shit."

The tech had put in a strenuous night. He lived alone and when he visited a brothel tried to make up for lost time. Last night he'd gotten drunk and ended up spending far beyond his means.

"Yes. Move an event from one temporal context to another and it changes like a chameleon moving to a new leaf. If Hitler had tried his tricks under Kaiser Wilhelm, he would have been sent to an asylum; if under the Federal Republic of Germany, to jail."

"Hitler who?" asked the tech, taking out a kif pipe and waving it at a waiter. He would have gotten up and moved away from the bore except that he felt so tired.

Thank the Great Tao today's a holiday, he was thinking. One pipe and I'll go home to sleep.

"Or consider the Time of Troubles."

"Must I?" asked the tech, stoking his pipe with a thin pinch of kif that the waiter had brought him.

He couldn't believe, looking back, that he had spent *every khan* he owned. Not a silver half-khan, not a copper tenth was left to chink in his

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pockets. His bank account was overdrawn. What would he eat on until payday? *Who* would he eat on? For he was not a man with friends.

"In 1950, nuclear war would have ruined a few cities and that's all. In 1970, it would have caused an immense but endurable catastrophe. In 2091, it devastated the Earth and almost annihilated humanity. But by then there were offworld colonies to resettle our lamentable planet."

The tech, never a polite man, was growing irritable.

"Mister, I've known sweeper robots had more original ideas than you."

Vray gave no sign of being insulted. His quiet voice droned on — a white sound, not unpleasant. He signaled for more tea for both of them.

"My point is that there was a window — shall we say — a window of opportunity. A time when sophisticated weapons existed but the offworld colonies weren't yet self-sustaining. Let's say from about 1980 to 2070. If the war had occurred then — "

"We wouldn't be drinking green tea and three hundred planets would be empty of the human life that infests them," said the tech, puffing.

He bowed slightly to thank Vray for the fresh tea. Vray noted that his companion had already reduced his pinch of kif to ashes.

"Allow me to buy you a decent quantity of kif."

"Don't mind if you do."

By the third pipe they'd gotten quite chummy. The tech's name was Maklúan and his view of life was anything but cheerful.

"I work with the world's most complicated and most useless goddamn machine," he groused, "and I get paid peanuts for doing it. I keep thinking things will get better, my life will turn around. I wish I could go to sleep for a thousand years, wake up and see if things've improved. If not, go back to sleep again."

"A man of your intelligence deserves better."

"You're fucking right. By the way," said Maklúan, "what's your business?"

"Oh," said Vray, "I buy and sell. Electronics, mainly. Twice-owned mashini, calcs and so on. I wonder, could you use some extra money?"

"Absolutely," said the tech, suddenly alert.

"It's a great piece of luck for me, meeting you this way. I'm thinking of adding certain sophisticated devices to my inventory, but I'm just not

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capable of understanding their fine points. I'd pay a thousand khans to have a man of your intelligence advise me."

Maklúan tried to conceal his delight, not very successfully.

"It sounds quite, ah, quite interesting," he muttered. "When would you like me to look these gadgets over?"

"If you're free," said Vray, rising, "there's no time like the present. And please — allow me to pay your check."

AFTER THE LONG, long years of preparation, things were speeding up. It's now or never, Vray thought. Before Maklúan's absence is noted at Pastplor. Before they make changes in the wormholer codes that he so kindly gave me just before dying. *Now.*

Fierce lines of afternoon sunlight burned around the shutters of the small room where he sat, dreaming of what was to come. He returned to the present when the woman sitting across the duroplast table from him — dumpy, washed-out, utterly forgettable, but a genius at her trade (which, oddly enough, had once been his trade) — asked:

"Well, what d'you want me to do with this?"

"First, I want you to read the code. Can you do it?"

She frowned at the square of hard ceramic lamina he'd given her, at the stacked layers of dotcode and the hologram of a pale-faced, red-haired man imprinted not on the ID but in it. She turned and snapped it into a monitor and dropped a pirated memory cube into the queue.

"Standard polizi code," she said. "Name, Maklúan Artur; Age, 31; Height, 2.01m; Weight, 68.5 kg; Profession, Wormholer Technician; Employer, Pastplor; Clearance, 1A; Police Record, None. Description...Well, that's the problem. You can't just insert your own picture and a new description to match yourself."

"Right. The mashina at the guard station would pick it up. Description and picture must match those in the system's memory. At the same time, a human guard will be looking from the ID to my face. He'll be looking casually, stupidly, the way those people always do. But he'll be looking. I want you to retain the hologram on the ID but morph it until it closely resembles this one."

She took the new hologram, frowning. It showed Vray wearing, not

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the cheap wig he'd received from the penal colony, but an expensive red wig precisely the color of Maklúan's hair. Vray's dark/pale face had been made up to resemble the tech's red/pale coloring, with a sprinkle of ginger freckles. Contact lenses changed his eyes' soulful brown to the peculiar blue-gray of Maklúan's.

"Huh," she muttered. "You're rather good-looking, he's ugly as a stump, and yet the bone structure is quite similar. And so is the height. Is that why you picked him?" She made a few quick measurements. "Didn't shut your jaws for the picture, did you? Bit your tongue. Lengthened your face a centimeter or so. Gave you that horsey look."

She nodded. "I can do it."

"Today?"

"That will cost you double. I've got a ton of work."

"Perhaps I can come back tonight, bring the money and pick up the card."

"Very well," she said. "Come about nineteen. It's none of my business, but I'm rather curious about your interest in Pastplor. I hope you don't mean to try and steal the wormholer. That's a beheader, and I don't mess with capital crimes."

"Hardly practical, since the wormholer weighs seven metric tons. I deal in small electronic devices of all sorts. The offices of this outfit are full of them and the security, once you're past the guard post, is negligible. By the way: if you ever need a new monitor, let me know."

She gave him a washed-out smile as he left. He almost regretted having to kill her.

"At nineteen then," he said, and went away.

Arriving back at work the day after the holiday — he and Maia had become more than friends at Lake Bai — Maks found a knot of polizi at the guard station and signs of strain among the technicians.

"What's the problem?" he asked Mogul, now back at work, a bit stringier and leaner than before.

"You know that red-haired guy, the wormholer technician? Well, the polizi found his body early this morning. He'd been tortured to death."

Maks felt shock. Not that he wouldn't have liked to kill Maklúan himself, but —

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"And there's been a security breach, too. Don't know exactly what. But the whole place is boiling like a teakettle."

In the hall, Lian grabbed Maks and pulled him into a vacant office and shut the door. One of the surprising things about her was her talent for picking up gossip.

"Maks, they've gotten back the medical examiner's preliminary report on the time of death for that son of a bitch Maklúan. You remember him, don't you?"

"Only too well," said Maks.

"Well, somebody used his ID to enter Pastplor a good twelve hours after he'd been killed."

Maks gave a long, low whistle.

"That's not the worst of it. The intruder might have been just a thief. But the wormholer's been tampered with."

They stared at each other.

"Another Crux?" whispered Maks. Lian shrugged.

"All I know is, someone totally unauthorized has gone into the past. Back before the Time of Troubles. Why, nobody seems to know."

By lunchtime other tidbits had been fed into the gossip mill.

"The polizi are finding other bodies," Lian reported to Maks and Mogul. They were eating together at a corner table in the noisy cafeteria. "They've found physical evidence to connect Maklúan's death with the murders of two women."

"It's a conspiracy," said Mogul.

"Either that or somebody who really gets around."

It was late in the afternoon of a stressful day when Colonel Yost called a meeting of the timesurfers. Because of the crowd the white-tiled walls soon became steamy with moisture.

Maks had always vaguely liked and trusted Yost's long pale face and his precise intellectual air. Stories that he presided at *shosho* sessions Maks dismissed as gossip.

Today Yost seemed undisturbed either by the heat or by catastrophic events. He repeated quietly the news that everybody already knew, then delivered some new tidbits.

"I must tell you that this incident has the makings of a major scandal."

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He sighed, his most emotional reaction so far.

"Tentative identification of our intruder has been made from the DNA in traces of semen retained in the body of one of his victims. Though he sometimes went by the name of Loki, he is really a criminal named Vray Dak, who served time in a penal colony."

"Are we sending somebody into the past after him?" Lian wanted to know.

"That has not yet been decided."

But as the members of the agency filed out, Yost called Mogul and Maks aside. In a low voice he told them that, while Vray had erased his destination from the wormholer's memory, a backup memory retained it.

"I believe this may have been Maklúan's last contribution to Pastplor," he said. "To conceal the existence of the backup. Or he may have died before he could give the necessary code. The tortures to which he was subjected indicated a certain inartistic crudeness on the part of the murderer. Or perhaps simply haste."

Something about the quiet, pedantic way he said this gave Maks a chill. Then Yost's next words made him forget everything else.

"His goal is Washington, two years before you men visited it. Please prepare at once for a new transit. I have no one else who knows anything about the city. You must go first, prepare a hiding place, and guide the polizi when they arrive. My statement that no decision has been made," he added apologetically, "was not entirely true."

How splendid it all is, Loki was thinking.

He sat on a broad marble terrace gazing into the dense pollen-colored light of the setting sun. In the distance a battle was raging on one of the city's broad avenues — a scuffle of black beetles, it looked like from this hill. Primitive noisy firearms exploded here and there.

He smiled blissfully. He had discarded his useless and inappropriate former names once and for all. No more Vray Dak, the counterfeiter of identities. No more Ya7326 the convict. Instead the name of an ancient fire god, a malicious being whose business was destruction.

To lounge upon a high place, looking down on a world, knowing that its future and its fate lay in your hands — if being a god didn't mean this, what did it mean?

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If he had ever doubted the fact of his deification in the tunnels of Calisto, he doubted it no longer. For this he had undergone torture and exile, to burn away the merely human, to make him the fated master — or the master of fate — he had become. He curled his fingers around empty air, feeling he held such *mosh* as no human had ever known.

Gas grenades popped and a column of masked soldiers double-timed toward the disturbance. They carried knives on the ends of their firearms and the points glinted and waved like a field of shining grain on the fertile fields of the Gobi.

He stood up and craned to see better, then ducked involuntarily as a bullet whistled overhead. He frowned at himself: as if a bit of metal could injure *him*.

Commands were shouted nearby and he turned to see a file of soldiers appear around the corner of an antique domed building looming behind him. A sergeant shouted at him and gestured coarsely with one thumb. Loki thought of killing him — he was carrying an impact pistol under a loose shirt he'd procured from the costume room at Pastplor.

No, he thought, retiring down a long flight of stained and worn marble steps, better do nothing to call premature attention to myself. There'll be killing enough later on.

That night was noisy and humid. Loki padded down a tree-lined street, reflecting on his first day here. The language was more of a problem than he'd expected. You couldn't learn much about the way real people spoke from a book, even an interactive book like the one he'd studied. Especially this ancient gobbling, mispronounced, full of allusions to things that had vanished centuries ago.

On the other hand, some things were unexpectedly easy about living in this world. The fact that he had an unintelligible accent didn't seem to bother anyone. The same was true of half the people in Washington. So far nobody had asked him for an ID. There seemed to be no checkpoints, no random arrests. The lack of social controls made him feel first giddy, then anxious.

Why, he thought, you can hardly call this a society at all — everybody doing whatever they please!

He was still brooding about the deplorable lack of order when he spotted an elderly woman who had come out to buy food. At once he forced

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her into an alley, killed her with a blow to the nape of the neck and robbed her. For a little time he hovered over the corpse whispering to the woman (as he'd whispered to Maklúan and his lover and the woman who forged identities), *Welcome, welcome to my kingdom.*

Then he went to dinner.

He ate in a small food shop, paying five thousand dollars from his store of stolen cash, and left the shop picking his teeth. Spotting a sign in a dimly lit window, he rented a room nine or ten blocks from the Capitol building. When the landlord tried to find out something about him, he relapsed into Alspeke.

"*Ya kam' syudá vas destrukta,*" he smiled, telling the truth for once. I came here to destroy you. You plural — all of you.

"Oh, a Russian," said the landlord. Mr. Santana wore his gray undershirt and permanent stubble of beard like a uniform of his calling. "I guess your luggage'll be along later?"

"Yess," said Loki, with what he hoped was a friendly smile.

"One thing I got to say for you people, you know how to run a country," said the landlord, showing him to a bed-sitter three flights up. "Not like them fuckers down the street."

Left alone, Loki counted his money, checked the impact pistol he'd bought on Ulanor's black market, and went to bed. Sleep proved difficult, for the heat was oppressive and a brownout had reduced the bed-sitter's primitive aircooler to tentative gasps. He got up, sweating, opened a window, dragged his mattress onto a little halfmoon-shaped balcony and stretched out there. A bit cooler, though not much.

In the distance, a shot. Closer at hand, a scream. Just below the balcony, a laugh. Ah, my brothers and sisters, he thought. They're all about, the hunters prowling the dark, rejoicing in the disorder that frightens everyone else.

Eventually he fell asleep and dreamed of slaughter until he was awakened by the sun.

On their second trip to Washington, Maks and Mogul found the city much as before. Sometimes it was hard to remember that they were two years deeper into the past than the last time they'd been here, since everything seemed just about the same.

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President Derrick Minh Smith was completing his second year in office and his record so far was the subject of noisy debate. A big, solid, slow-talking politician, he had the necessary ethnic mix — part white, part black, part latin, part southasian. (Southasians were current favorites with Americans because of their heroic resistance to Chinese aggression.)

He came to power with a mandate for restoring order, but his use of force so far had been brutal and inept. In Idaho several National Guard units had gone over to the rebels; people were talking about a downward spiral, but nobody knew how to stop it.

As for Vray Dak, he was invisible in a disorderly city of nineteen million. Completely untrained in police work, Maks and Mogul had not a clue as to how to proceed, except to get a place to live and prepare for the arrival of the professionals who would manage the search. They found an apartment in the lower reaches of Capitol Hill near the Burned-Out District, in a hundred-and-fifty-year-old red-brick rowhouse owned by a slatternly widow named Mrs. Crane.

Here they laid out their small valises with a change of 21st-century clothing, impact pistols, their own wormholer controls and two extras — one to return Vray's body to their own time, one for backup in case a control was damaged. Then they went shopping, using a counterfeit cashcard manufactured by the Security Forces' digital imagers. They needed to be in electronic contact with this world, and so they bought first a tivi that received the local thousand channels.

"A thousand!" said Mogul, shaking his head. "Great Tao, Ulanor gets along with three channels. In the offworlds, there are whole planets that have exactly one. I don't see how the government can maintain control, do you? Why, anything might go out over the air! Do you suppose the polizi watch all thousand?"

Maks shook his head. This world grew stranger, not more familiar, the longer he stayed in it.

"It's no wonder everything's in such a mess," he had to agree. "Nobody's in *charge* here."

The day was hot, the walk long. The tainted air made them cough, and the crowds were mind-numbing. Street-corner orators bawled their messages and small crowds of red-faced, sweating people shouted yea or nay.

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In another electronics store they bought a second kind of primitive mashina. This one had a brain, and was called a kompyutor.

"Everybody's got one," a baffled clerk told them. "Where you guys from? No, you don't need a license to own it. What do people do with it? Well, they all send and receive whatever they please, including invitations to attend riots. It's up to you what you use it for."

They returned to their apartment weary and soaked their feet, sitting side by side on the edge of a pink plastic tub that sported the hair of unknown people embedded in a gray ring. Then they unboxed and began to examine the purchases they'd made during the day.

The tivi was a disappointment — just sex, sports, baffling comedies, ranting Old Believer priests. They set the kompyutor up on a battered plastic kitchen table and were just about to try a few commands when the room flickered.

A sudden hot wind rushed through the apartment, tossing their unpacked clothing against the walls. A figure condensed as if a billion pixels had rushed together from the far horizons to form a single image. The image moved, smiled — the woman was wearing the clothing of the 21st century and carrying an impact pistol in her hand — and she was Zo Lian.

At once the kompyutor was abandoned. For an instant Maks wanted to ask Lian how she'd found them so precisely, but then he forgot the question. Instead they embraced and laughed, and then they all went out for dinner.

The soy house had its own gasoline-run generator and a big fan that whipped the hot air into furious motion. Afterward they strolled a few blocks and sat down together on the grass in a small park while dusk darkened into breathless night. The heat was such that forty or fifty people were resting on the grass nearby.

They chatted softly in Alspeke, a language that only one other man in the city could have understood.

"Why'd they decide to send you, Lian?"

"I harassed Colonel Yost until he agreed." She touched Maks's arm. "I thought you might need help."

"Since you're here to help us," said Mogul with a slight ironic accent on *help*, "perhaps you've got some idea of how to find one photon in a nova. In other words, one criminal in a 21st-century metropolis."

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"Well, I do have a idea. Basically, this is why Yost allowed me to come. We're assuming that Vray Dak wants to change history. So how's he going to do it?"

"I've asked myself that question ten-to-the-tenth-power times," admitted Maks, "and I still don't know."

Lian had brought a *meshok* — beltpouch — of kif and three folding pipes with her. Since other people lying in the dark grass among the katydids were smoking various substances, the surfers lit up as well. Traffic rumbled on the nearby streets and polizi hovercraft buzzed and sputtered overhead, drawing white fingers of searchlights across the city.

"Here's a suggestion," said Lian. "The one thing he has that could make him a man of influence in this world is his knowledge of the future. Suppose he tries to set himself up as a prophet?"

Maks smoked quietly, letting the drug relax and clarify his mind. It was Mogul who spoke up.

"That's an idea," he admitted. "And if you're right, I think I know how to find him."

"Ah," said Maks. "The kompyutor."

At this point a man lying on the grass nearby asked in Russian, "*Izvinitye, pozhal'sta. Vi govoritye po-russki?*"

"Not a word," said Lian, and the three surfers got up, stretched themselves, and strolled away into the night.

"I could swear," said the man querulously, "that those guys were talking some sort of Russian. I worked in Moscow for five years with our embassy and I recognized a word here, a word there. But it's not like any Russian I ever heard."

"Don't ask me," said a man who was lying next to him. "Not all so well I don't know Inlish mine self."

Then he rose and slouched casually away into the darkness, following the surfers.

The Russian speaker sighed and stretched out again, hoping for a breath of cool air but finding none. What a city, he thought. Nineteen million people and no two of them can really understand each other. No wonder things are in such a mess.

* * *

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Working with the primitive kompyutor wasn't easy, Maks quickly discovered.

In spite of all their training in archaic English, it was always misunderstanding their commands — even Lian's, who spoke the language best. Though its cyberspace was limited to the Earth and Luna and ought to have been fairly simple to move around in, in fact it was more complicated than anything Maks had ever seen.

As the clerk had told them, all sorts of totally unauthorized people used it for every imaginable purpose and finding things required a knowledge of mysterious icons that meant nothing to the time travelers.

Maks was still confused and angry at the gadget when a thunderstorm swept in, relieving the heat but shutting off the electricity and blanking out the kompyutor. So they went to bed, waking only for the watch Mogul insisted they keep, sitting up one at a time with their backs against the apartment's flimsy door.

Just after dawn, Maks, who'd had the last watch, again tried his luck on the strange mashina. He felt like a 21st-century navigator compelled to use an astrolabe, contemptuous of the primitive instrument yet baffled as to how to use it properly. Aside from offers from an array of sex services, the only thing of interest he seemed able to get was an infopage called The Moon Today, inserted by the International Space Agency.

The sound of the kompyutor's nonhuman voice woke first Lian, who was sleeping on a divan, and then Mogul, who entered from the bedroom.

"Things must be really crude up on Luna," Maks reported. "It's not a self-sustaining colony yet. They're just installing the first laser-fired pure-hydrogen reactor and it's a new technology and everybody's expecting it to blow up. They've found the deep permafrost beds under the Sea of Tranquillity, but they haven't figured out a way to extract the water efficiently. Everyone's living in domes half buried in the dust and drinking recycled urine."

"I think I had some of that with dinner last night," muttered Mogul, for the city's water supply was contaminated and resembled tea in color though not in taste.

Maks continued to try his luck, wasting some time futilely looking for Prophets.

"Try psychics," suggested Lian.

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"I don't know that word. What does it mean?"

"Just try it."

Sure enough, the keyword yielded a directory of names and specialties. Some psychics apparently did nothing but find lost pets; some, lost children; some gave tips on the stock market; some helped with errant lovers. Apparently President Smith was a believer, for some psychics averred that they were "Often Consulted by the White House."

Many predicted the future, and here Maks concentrated his efforts. One advertisement followed another, every one rich in promises of better times.

"Poor bastards," he muttered. "I suppose I could tell them, 'The future won't only be worse than you imagine; the future will be worse than you *can* imagine.' But who'd want to believe that?"

Lian got up and stood behind him. Suddenly she said, "There!"

"Where?"

"'The Future So Real. Firm tip on whats happening politicly.' Only our friend would be likely to write like that."

Maks tapped the screen. A face startlingly like the dead tech stared out at them. The come-on promised, "Absolute tip on next year doing in high level political thing. Aks and you sall get all you wish to know bout Congress & Pres outcome world event cetera. Cost merely $12.5K per suces." A long string of symbols followed, concluding, "Futureman.psi."

"I wonder how many customers he's gotten with this," smiled Lian.

Mogul had joined them. "Can you ask him a question?"

Maks enunciated Vray's address in his best Archaic English and ordered, "Call."

All three tensed: for the first time they were about to speak directly to their quarry.

"How can I assist you?" asked a cool female voice.

They looked at each other.

"I would," said Maks slowly and clearly, "like to know Futureman's prediction for the outcome of the current fighting in Montana. Will the government be successful or will the rebels?"

"Please leave your E-address. Futureman will return your call within thirty minutes. Cost to you will be only 12,500 dollars."

They looked at each other. Mogul was saying, "Well, of course we don't have an E-address," and Lian was saying at the same time, "It's some

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sort of answering service, don't you see," when they heard a scream from downstairs.

Then a small, dull sound on the staircase, more like a cough than anything else.

Lian recovered first, diving for her weapon as feet pounded up the wooden stairs. Maks, slower to respond, was just beginning to grasp the danger when the flimsy door burst open and a tall man with red wig askew stepped into the apartment, raised an impact pistol with both hands and touched the firing stud.

The round hit Mogul square in the chest and flung him backward over the kompyutor. Maks was halfway to the floor by then and the second round clipped his flying hair and blew a small hole in the wall of the building. In the same instant Lian's answering shot struck the intruder in the belly and tore him in half.

Suddenly and with amazingly little noise the room had become a bloody shambles. Blood sprayed the walls and ceiling; dust drifted in the air, and a ray of sunlight entering through the crater blown by Vray's round illuminated a slow-swirling universe of motes. Maks raised a head whitened by plaster and stared uncomprehendingly at the ruin, the shattered bodies.

Lian got up quietly, gun in hand. Warily she approached Vray's body, turned its lower half over. She knelt and spent a minute or two going through the pockets. Maks turned his attention to Mogul, but the sight was horrible and trying to help was pointless. Mogul was dead, the center of his ribcage pulped, twenty centimeters of his spine missing.

Shuddering, sick to his stomach but unable to vomit, Maks turned away. He stumbled to the window and stared out. The street looked absolutely normal. The hole was in a side wall and would go unnoticed unless the neighbors happened to look up. The impact weapons spoke so quietly that even the birds in the small, heat-dried plane trees outside continued to flutter and sing in celebration of dawn as if nothing had happened at all.

Lian showed Maks her bloody gleanings. Vray had almost 80,000 dollars in notes — "Not much," remarked Lian, "he'd have had to start stealing again pretty soon" — and several important items of information as well.

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Maklúan's ID was there, with the picture Vray had used to set up his page. Several stained and folded pieces of paper: a receipt from We Speak 4 U Arbot Service; another from the landlord of a rooming house on Capitol Hill not ten blocks from this one. Then Lian held up like trophies two metal keys for mechanical locks.

"Entry to his den," she said.

Maks was still full of shock and sickness. He felt like a child; he wanted to cry, but controlled himself.

"I guess I wasn't much good in the crisis," he muttered. He kept thinking that somehow he ought to have saved Mogul. Lian understood at once and spoke soothingly.

"You couldn't have saved him, Maks. Anyway, he was the senior member of the party and the fact that we were caught off guard was more his fault than yours or mine."

Maks nodded but felt no better. If not exactly a friend, Mogul had been his companion in adventure and they had trusted and depended on each other.

"I suppose we'd better be preparing for transit," Maks said. Then suddenly he turned and embraced Lian.

"Thank you. For saving me. I'd be like Mogul except for you."

Even in his distress he noticed yet again the oddness of her body's feel. She stood quietly, not responding to his embrace, just experiencing it. Then gently pushed him away.

"You're welcome," she said. "But we've got things to do. Before we go, we have to visit Vray's apartment and clean out anything that might show he was from the future."

"You're right, you're right," Maks muttered, wondering how he could have overlooked something so obvious. Lian gave him another gentle shove, this time toward the bathroom.

"You can't go outside like that," she said. "Wash off the blood. And get the plaster dust out of your hair."

Now she's treating me like a child, thought Maks resentfully as he scrubbed. Drying his head, he reflected on his career thus far. All his life he'd been a mediocrity, and Lian — cool and daring and inhumanly detached — had shown him only too clearly that he was one still.

He rejoined her looking clean, sober. They walked down the stairs,

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avoiding their landlady's shattered corpse, disturbing a few green flies. Out into the hot sunlight, where the air tasted like iron filings and the murmur of a mob could already be heard in the distance, preparing the day's demonstration.

"I'll be glad when we get home," said Maks. Lian raised her eyebrows. "Oh yes?"

"Yes. I'm going to resign once this job's done," said Maks, and they walked the rest of the way to Vray's dwelling without speaking.

Finding a dour-looking, undershirted man seated on the front steps of Vray's building, they waited until he finished reading a crumpled piece of hardcopy — the four-page "morning paper" that could be bought for a 500-dollar coin from containers at streetcorners — and shuffled away on some errand or other.

Then they used the two keys to enter first the house and — after much fruitless trying of locks — Vray's own room. It was big, airy, with odd pieces of hardware left over from earlier centuries. Pipes for illuminating gas dangled from the ceiling and ancient painted-over copper wiring was still tacked to the baseboards.

They quickly searched Vray's neatly made bed and closet, finding that he had carried his habits of deception and anonymity into the past with him.

"The only things he had that clearly say 'Future' we've already got," said Lian when the search was over. "I thought he might have some extra rounds of ammo here, but apparently what we found was all he had."

Maks shook his head. "I still don't really understand his plan. What was he after, committing those murders in Ulanor, coming to this place? What could he hope to accomplish?"

Lian shrugged.

"I kicked that around with Colonel Yost before I left. It's debatable, of course, but the date — 2050 — may be significant. The histories all say that tensions between America and China were high at the time, until President Smith made concessions to buy peace. Vray might have hoped to influence Smith to set off the Time of Troubles early, which would have meant the end of humanity. Rather a pathetic hope, considering he couldn't even speak the language decently. But then Vray may have been paranoid, with delusions of omnipotence. Whether he was born that way or driven around the bend by torture and isolation, who can say?"

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Maks nodded slowly.

"It amazes me how you can figure things," he said. "Well, come on, Lian. Let's clear out. We've got some messy work still to do."

Lian shook her head, smiling.

"Maks, Maks," she said, drawing her pistol. "It's too bad. You're such a nice guy, but so dumb. We're not going back. I'm going to carry out what Vray started. Only I'm going to do it right."

IMPROVISING A KANG was easy enough. Lian had Maks remove two slats from Vray's bed and cords from the window blinds and wet them in the sink.

Then Maks had to lie down with his neck and wrists on one board while Lian laid the second over his Adam's apple. She knelt on the second board, almost throttling him, and tied his wrists and head tightly between the boards. As a kang it was imperfect, but it served.

Lian tied his ankles as well. Finally, she gagged Maks with a torn pillowcase and left him lying on the floor while she returned to the other building to dispose of the corpses, sending them to the future. She was an efficient worker; forty minutes later she was back, carrying a bag with her personal items.

Her last job before resting was to call up Vray's web page and rewrite it in clear, elegant Archaic English. Then she removed Maks's gag and sat down on the floor beside him to have a chat.

"I sent a note with the bodies, explaining that Vray had a confederate and that you and I were going after him. I added that no backup would be needed. I think that our success in getting rid of Vray will impress them enough to trust our judgment. Kif?"

Lian held the pipe to Maks's lips to help him smoke. Then, like old friends, they talked quietly together.

"How long have you been thinking about destroying us?" asked Maks. His voice was still hoarse from Lian kneeling on his throat; it hurt just to swallow his spit.

Lian thought for a long time. She had turned on a small lamp. Sitting on the floor (she wouldn't sit on a chair, as if politeness forbade putting herself on a higher level than Maks) she looked even less human than usual.

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Like an extinct beast — what was its name? Maks wondered. Oh yes, the cheetah. A kind of cat, skinny, long-limbed, with a great barrel chest and a killer's heart. Dimly, from some long-ago Earth Biology class, he remembered that the female of the species had been the most accomplished hunter.

"Do you know," Lian finally asked, "how the Darksiders became servants of humanity?"

"No."

"My planet, Beta Charonis, has an unusual motion: one side always faces its sun, the other always away. A civilized race called the Siat gradually won dominance of the warm side. The Darksiders were primitives — intelligent but mute, with a crude material culture — and they were forced back gradually into the penumbra, the twilight between the two hemispheres. Often when they were under attack they had to retreat into the region of everlasting cold. They acquired the eyes of nocturnal beings, the fur of creatures acclimated to cold and the howling winds that always blow between the two sides of the planet. They lived in nomadic societies that you might call either packs or tribes.

"Then came the humans, and their *mosh* changed everything. The Siat resisted their attempts to take land and mines. So the humans allied themselves to the Darksiders. Without fighting themselves, they supplied modern weapons to their barbarian friends, who proceeded to wipe out the Siat with unimaginable savagery. The Darksiders imprisoned their foes in pits and spent — I don't know how long; a long time — dragging them out a few at a time to flay and burn and eat. The humans took what they wanted from the planet, mainly ores, and in time they began to use the Darksiders as mercenaries."

Maks said, "That's a horrible story, but it doesn't explain your actions."

"It's hard to convey," said Lian, frowning. "There aren't any words for what I feel because there aren't any precise words for what I am. When the mining companies were looking for a way to adapt humans to Beta Charonis they borrowed a few surviving Siat slaves from the Darksiders and the *mediki* experimented on them. Of course our *mediki* weren't the best by any means, and they came up with synthetic genes that changed more than they were supposed to change. Sometimes I think I'm more Siat

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than human. Certainly I've never felt human. And if I can bring this off, the whole episode of the human invasion will never have happened at all."

"How can you hope to destroy a whole species?"

"It's very, very difficult," she sighed. "But I didn't come to Earth expecting it to be easy. In fact, until the timesurfer program was set up, I didn't have any clear plan at all."

At this moment the kompyutor chimed. Lian listened to the query for Futureman — how would the coming congressional elections come out? She answered that the party split would be: National Union, twelve percent; Revolutionary All-American, seven point five percent; Constitutional Conservative, seven percent...and so on down to Democratic, three percent, and Republican, one point eight percent.

"You have a remarkable memory," murmured Maks.

"I read your report on your first trip to Washington two years from now," said Lian. "It was truly informative."

They smoked a while longer, until Maks got up the courage to ask another crucial question.

"What do you intend to do with me?"

Lian let thin trickles of smoke exit her nostrils.

"I'd like to let you live for whatever time remains," she said. "Of course I can't. But killing you will be...painful. I've had such an awful life and for a while I thought — "

She coughed on the smoke, didn't finish.

Maks twisted his head against the cords. Stared at her. Great Tao, he thought. So that's it.

Then despair took over again. What if he was the window in the wall the experimenters on Beta Charonis had built around her? She knew he'd never love her, and so she'd kill him in time.

The kompyutor chimed. The voice of the answering-service arbot said, "The customer you just replied to wishes to know how you can make such precise predictions?"

"Because," said Lian. "I am not a psychic. I am a messenger from the future, come to prevent dreadful things from happening. President Derrick Minh Smith is the key figure, the pivot upon whom the ages turn. If he chooses right, the whole human species will live, and if he chooses wrong they will all perish. I'm here to give him such help as I may."

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Lian smiled at Maks.

"That should attract the idiot," she remarked.

The kompyutor chimed again.

"Yes," said Lian.

"The previous customer has now paid 37,500 dollars," said the service. "His new question is this: What will be the outcome of the present fighting in Idaho and Montana? Will the federal forces win, or will the rebels?"

"Neither," answered Lian promptly. "Both will still be engaged in pointless conflict when the Chinese attack occurs."

Apparently the cool-voiced arbot wasn't prepared for phrases like "Chinese attack."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Repeat my words exactly as I have said them," said Lian, and smiled at Maks.

"We have a fish," she said.

Night came on with a sudden shower of rain, unexpected coolness. Lian fed herself and Maks. When Maks complained of pain in his shoulders, Lian massaged him gently but firmly.

"You ought to practice patience," she admonished. "Pain is only pain, after all. With the proper attitude, one can endure anything."

She sounded now like one of Maks's childhood amahs.

For the night, Lian dragged and lifted Maks onto Vray's bed, made him as comfortable as possible, tied his feet to the footboard, then put out the lamp and curled up like a cat on the floor. A little while later, Maks heard the regular breathing of deep sleep.

In the darkness, immobile in the kang, Maks could only think of Jesus, the god of the Old Believers, who had died on a cross. It's a rotten way to go, he thought. I wonder if he had as little choice in the matter as I have.

He woke when the kompyutor chimed. Tall windows had turned gray and slow rain was falling. Lian spoke quietly to her caller, jotted something down on a scrap of paper. Then she cleaned herself up and put on fresh clothes.

"Someone important wants to interview me," she told Maks. "I'll try to be as quick as I can. Perhaps you'd like a drink before I go?"

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Maks drank the water. He didn't bother to mention that he hurt, that he was stiff. Lian would simply tell him to practice patience. He also needed to urinate, but was embarrassed by the implications if he said so.

Just before she gagged him, he said, "I suppose I could have had a worse executioner than you."

"Oh, very definitely."

Then Lian was gone. Quietly, checking the stairs first to be sure the landlord was not about, then locking the door behind her. Distantly the front door closed.

The rain fell like the slow drumming of bored fingers. Maks tried to keep his circulation going, clenching and unclenching his fists, wiggling his toes. His skin felt as if it had been sandpapered; he itched intolerably. A cockroach climbed ticklishly up one leg, explored his face, and fed on fluid oozing from his nose until he sneezed and sent it scuttling away.

He needed to urinate, to defecate, tried to hold it, couldn't. He had heard about prisoners who were forced to lie in their own excrement, but he had never thought he could be brought so low.

In a sudden fury, he twisted and wrenched at the cords until his neck and wrists bled. It was hopeless. He began to sob and the tears ran out of the corners of his eyes and down his cheekbones. Thunder muttered a long way off. The rain stopped, then started again.

Footsteps were ascending the staircase. At first he thought Lian had returned, then realized that the steps were too heavy and too slow. A key rattled in the lock, and a weighty middle-aged man backed in. His arms were full of sheets, pillowcases and towels. It was change-the-linen day.

He turned, displaying the permanent bristle of gray beard, the permanent undershirt. A cigarette was sutured to his lower lip. When he caught sight of Maks, his jaw dropped but the cigarette clung to its place.

"Sheeeee," he muttered. "Who's this?"

Maks made incoherent sounds and the landlord approached, wrinkling his nose. He pulled the gag off roughly and repeated his question.

"I own this joint," he added. "Name's Santana. Now talk."

"Your tenant kidnapped me," gasped Maks, his speech unusually thick because the gag had dried his mouth.

"Good Christ, another Russian," said Santana. "What is that guy, Mafia?"

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"Yes, *mafya*," said Maks.

"Well, I'll be goddamned. They know you at the embassy?"

"Yes. Could you please untie me?"

The landlord frowned, debated the question in his mind. What if this guy was Moscow Mafia, too? On the other hand, he looked different from the tenant; a different kind, more like a college kid. Slowly and reluctantly, he began to untie Maks.

"The Mafia must be like the Boy Scouts."

"Why?"

"Teach 'em to tie good knots. What'd he want from you?"

"Money and cashcards," said Maks promptly. "He's out right now, trying to use my cards."

"We'll call the cops as soon as I get you loose."

Just sitting up was agony. Every muscle seemed to have frozen and rusted in place. Maks's arms were dead white, his feet and ankles swollen. At first he couldn't stand. Santana helped him, but with obvious reluctance.

"I can see you've had a rough time, young fella, but frankly, you stink pretty bad."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize. Go wash."

Maks did, while the landlord shook his head over the stained and fragrant bedding he'd left behind. He took the sheets with obvious distaste and threw them into the hall.

Somewhat restored to decency, Maks rejoined him, wearing a set of Vray's clothing with only moderate discomfort at armpits and crotch.

"You call the polizi," he told Santana (the Alspeke word just slipped out). "I'm going straight to the embassy to report this. My name is Ivanov Nikolas — pardon me, Nikolas Ivanov — and I'll be there when they want me."

"What if he comes back?"

"Go stay in your apartment until the polizi come. Have you a weapon?"

"You bet I do. The most illegal one I could find."

"Shoot him if he tries to come in. Oh, and he has a confederate who's even worse than he is — a young woman with weird-looking eyes. Stay

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completely out of her way. Tell the poliz — police that she's armed with a new type of exploding ammo the Moscow Mafia's been trying out. Tell them she's extremely dangerous."

Suddenly the forgotten cigarette burned the landlord's lip and he cursed and flung it away.

"Christ, that thing cost me twelve bucks on the black market," he muttered and lurched away into the shadowy hall.

Maks waited at the head of the stairs until he heard the door of Santana's first-floor apartment close and four separate locks snap into place. Then he called the answering service on Vray's kompyutor.

"I've lost my note on that address you gave me," he said. "Would you please repeat it?"

"Room 3657B, Executive Office Building."

His last chore was to unplug the kompyutor and wrap it in an extra shirt. A minute later he was on the street, hungry and tense and happier than ever in his life just to be free, to be moving, to be capable of action again. The blood pumped deliciously through his whole body, erasing the last traces of stiffness.

Lian, Lian, he thought. You should have killed me when you had the chance. If you don't know that yet, you will.

HE SMILED GRIMLY. Adrift in a disorderly city centuries before his birth with no money, no weapon, and no way to communicate with his own time or return to it, he was recalling Mogul's remark that time travel was not for sweet kids.

Yet he had a plan. Maks was searching for the kind of shop where small loans were made. The Alspeke word was *zlog*, but for the life of him he couldn't remember the Archaic English; all he could think of was, for some reason, the game of chess.

He plunged into the streams of people flowing past the Capitol, with its peeling iron dome and mellow stone walls and small groups of soldiers idling near the autogun emplacements on the weedy lawn.

He'd walked nearly three clicks when the word "pawn" suddenly registered in his mind. It was painted on a small windowless building equipped with a steel door and two hired thuggi lounging on a bench

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outside. Each man had a pistol stuck in his belt. They looked at Maks with the eyes of bored dogs as he entered. A few minutes later he emerged, richer by a thousand dollars — enough to buy breakfast, which he did at a greasy food kiosk down the street.

With food in his belly and vengeance on his mind, he found the rest of his walk to the White House easy. All that running and wrestling and swimming is paying off, he thought. But the White House was easier to look at than to approach. The streets that ran by the Treasury were blocked off and patrolled by uniformed thuggi and by others in civilian clothes, each with a little button of a jabber mike stuck in his ear. They were, Maks decided, probably more dangerous than the uniformed types and he gave them a wide berth.

He had to circle wide, up 14th Street to Franklin Park, where more soldiers were encamped under spreading green trees, then along Eye Street to 17th and south again, giving Lafayette Square a wide berth. Must have been a riot there, he thought, eyeing the throng of soldiers and polizi and the meat wagons from the Medical Examiner's office and the mediki removing bodies.

It was one P.M. — that is to say, thirteen — or a little past when he reached the old multi-columned Executive Office Building. On the rooftop, batteries of television cameras and laser-activated automatic weapons turned slowly from side to side; within the building, Maks assumed, kompyutors were watching for suspicious behavior. Further down 17th Street smoke was rising from the hulk of the Corcoran Museum, recently torched.

Intent as he was on finding Lian, he loitered for long minutes in this dangerous region, fascinated by the sight of his own world, the world of the Darksiders and the Security Forces, already — more than forty years before the war of 2091 — beginning to emerge from the decay of what textbooks called the Democratic Century.

Getting into the building seemed hopeless. Only one entry was open and people going through it were being checked and scanned. Lian had passed through that door at the invitation of someone within. But nobody had invited Maks, and if he lingered too long the kompyutors would spot him as a suspicious person.

For an instant he considered getting himself picked up for questioning;

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at least it was a way in. But a shudder went through him just to think of it; he knew now what being a prisoner meant.

Instead, he drifted with a passing group of federal workers, all equipped with metal ID collars, back to Pennsylvania Avenue and up it toward the northwest. He could not get at Lian inside the building, but he could wait for her to come out. Assuming, that is, he could tolerate waiting at all.

For Lian, the morning went first well, then badly.

The presidential aide who'd vouched for her at the guardpost was lowly, a young man worthy of nothing more than a tiny office in a deep basement. The aide had dandruff and pinkish eyes and even a trace of acne, as if he'd finished with adolescence only last month. A youngster whose life was a long series of putdowns from his superiors, he glared at her with defensive arrogance.

"So you're from the future?"

Lian smiled. "Just so."

"I'll try to explain in simple terms why I'm wasting time with you. We've got these arbots, little bundles of artificial intelligence with complicated algorithms that can carry on lengthy conversations. We put them into cyberspace to entrap subversives by drawing them into conversations where they give themselves away...."

"I'm familiar with the technique in possibly more sophisticated form," said Lian patiently.

The aide frowned. "Well, false prophecies are politically useful in some instances but dangerous in others. So we have arbots check the psychics and draw them out. The odd thing about you is that your data on the next election's quite close to some highly classified computer estimates done for the President. We'd like to know where you got your information."

"From a history," said Lian, "that will not be written for three hundred years. If your estimates are in basic agreement with my data, I'd say they're quite accurate. May I make a suggestion?"

The aide raised sandy eyebrows.

"Certain objects were taken from me when I passed through the checkpoint. If you ask to have them brought here, you may find what I'm saying a bit more believable."

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Sighing, the aide touched a button and spoke to a small, shiny intercom. Then he took some papers out of his desk and ostentatiously worked on them until the door opened and a uniformed guard placed in front of him a ceramic disk and two oblong devices with metal studs and cyrillic lettering.

Lian picked up the disk and warmed it in her hands. "Say," she told it.

"What time you get your break?"

"Ten to."

"Long time to go."

"Tell me 'bout it."

"Fuckin' Redskins lost that preseason game."

"Deadskins, I call 'em."

The sparkling conversation at the guard post continued to unroll. The aide took the disk and examined it for controls, finding none.

"So you just talk to it," he said with mild interest. "Neat."

"Do you have anything similar?"

Immediately the aide's face became blank.

"Maybe and maybe not."

"Perhaps," said Lian, losing patience, "you'd be kind enough to direct me to someone less stupid than yourself?"

The aide spoke again to the intercom. "Send a guard. I got somebody who's leaving."

"Do you have something like this?" asked Lian. Playing her trump card, she handed over one of the controls.

"I'm not touching one goddamn thing," said the aide, rising. "You, lady, are a nut, and this thing I bet is a bomb."

The door opened. A fat guard stood in the doorway, the one, Lian remembered, whose break was scheduled for ten-to. Without hesitation Lian handed her other control to the guard, who took it with a baffled look.

"Watch out!" yelled the aide.

Lian touched the return stud and jumped back, shoving the aide against the wall. The guard's plump body flickered, they saw his guts, they saw his bones, they saw nothing at all. The doorway was empty.

Lian pushed the aide into his chair, closed the door, and sat down across from him again.

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"Do you know where he's gone?" she asked, taking back the remaining control.

"To the future?" asked the aide, weakly.

"Yes."

They sat looking at each other for the greater part of a minute. Finally Lian's patience ran out again.

"Hadn't you better notify your superiors?" she asked.

"Oh," said the aide. "Yeah. I guess so."

In the ammoniac fumes of a men's toilet, Maks bent over the recumbent body of a federal worker he had followed in and rapped lightly on the base of the skull.

He examined the ID collar closely, then stood up with a curse. There was no way to remove it except to saw it through or cut off the man's head. He was tolerably certain that cutting the collar would inactivate it, and he wasn't willing to decapitate anybody but Lian.

With a muttered apology, he took the man's money — 120,000 dollars, he carried a fair sum — and his cashcard and slipped out of the toilet and the restaurant it belonged to, unobserved.

So now I'm a thief, he was thinking. I wonder if they have penal colonies in 2050. My guess is they do.

HOW TRUE the saying is, Lian reflected, that government is a system devised by geniuses to be run by idiots. It was as true in the 21st century as in her own; no doubt it had been true in the Venetian Republic, in the Tang Empire, in thrice-ancient Ur of the Chaldees.

The dandruffy aide's superior was indeed that: superior. Paranoid, perhaps, but not to be accused of stupidity. He examined the ceramic disk and simply nodded. Nobody needed to tell him that it was the end product of a technological evolution that had hardly begun.

"I suppose if I have it X-rayed there won't be anything showing inside," he muttered, adding with a faint smile, "I'd like to have seen the business with the guard."

He was a small man, balding, his flesh burnt away by a lifetime of trusting nobody. His name was Gray.

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"Unfortunately," Lian told him, "I've only got one control device left. If you need to see it work, call in another guard."

"You wouldn't mind being marooned in this goddamn century?" asked Gray, continuing to smile bleakly.

"I can help you to make it better. Better than you might believe. Because, unlike anyone else now living, I know what happened."

Gray put up a tent of thin bony fingers that were stained with some drug, probably nicotine.

"Tell me what 'happened,' as you put it."

"China will soon take advantage of America's distress to attack you. Your Russian and European allies will express horror, but do nothing."

"Of course," said Gray, who looked as if he could believe anything about anybody, especially allies. "You won't have heard yet, but China's sending a peace delegation to discuss our outstanding differences. Quite a suspicious act in itself. What better time to start a war than while you're talking peace? Please go on."

"A brief period of peace will be bought by the sacrifice of roughly ninety-two million American lives. But it's only a breather. In circumstances that remain unclear, general war breaks out in 2052 with a thermo/bio exchange so massive as to create a two-year winter while launching lethal epidemics of genetically enhanced influenza viruses that decimate the survivors. Twelve billion people will die."

Gray nodded. "About in line with projections. Every once in a while one of our engineered viruses gets loose and there's hell to pay."

"I have been sent to urge you as strongly as I can to take the only action that can forestall this terrible catastrophe, which is known to our small community of survivors as the Time of Troubles. I refer to preventive war."

Gray said slowly, "That possibility has been...discussed. May I see that gadget?"

Lian handed over the control. Gray sat back and looked at it, then, with a wry smile, said to his intercom, "Call the guard station and tell them to send in Harry."

To Lian he added, "He's the one I can spare best. I hope the people in your time don't mind being sent another idiot."

The door opened and a hulking man entered. Harry looked like a

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Darksider without fur. Lian waited for the new experiment, her mind dwelling with amusement on the astonishment at Pastplor as still another bewildered stranger came through the wormholer.

"Arrest her," said Gray, and Harry grabbed for Lian.

She reacted without thinking, jabbed the big man's adam's apple with karate-hardened fingers and hurled him back a step into the hall with a gargling sound in his throat. Then Lian turned on Gray, only to find herself facing a crude pistol the man had pulled from some recess.

There was a sound of thunder.

"Whatever the truth may be," Gray told the President, "I could hardly have allowed this person into your presence until she was rendered helpless and thoroughly scanned. We've had too many cases of suiciders swallowing plastic microbombs, passing through the screens and blowing up everything in sight."

Smith, staring at the control, merely nodded.

Of course they weren't in the Oval Office: that light-flooded room, for all its triple-paned bulletproof glass, was occupied only by a robot resembling the President, which moved about, conferring with other robots, appearing to drink coffee. It was there to draw fire. Recently a maniac had tried to crash a small plane into the office, only to be stopped in midair by a missile.

Thirty-six meters below, the President kept to his bunker, a complex of offices and guard posts, communication centers and dispensaries, dining halls and dormitories. This comfortable room was his favorite, its walls decorated with trompe l'oeil images of rare books. The furniture was deep-cushioned Victorian; the pictures on the walls, historic portraits.

A rosewood armoire and the walls of creamy old plaster hid the electronic spiderweb that connected the President to the outside world. Overhead, faux candles flickered in a chandelier with one hundred prisms. An imitation fire burned in an imitation fireplace.

"Still, it's too bad she's dead," said Smith in his deep, heavy voice. "I'd like to know just what her game was."

"Well, the ME's working on the body now," said Gray. "DNA's still being analyzed, but parts of the genome have been replaced with sequences that are either nonhuman or else artificial. Her body's undergone some kind of modification, possibly for life on another world."

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"That doesn't seem to fit the story she told you."

Gray looked at his leader gratefully. He liked working for somebody who was almost as smart as he was.

"Exactly, Chief. If there's to be a general catastrophe, if nothing's left three hundred years from now but what our visitor called a small community of survivors, how did she happen to get modified for life on another planet? For that matter, how did such a community manage to produce the sophisticated technology that brought her here? Something's wrong."

"And," said the President, shaking his head in wonder, "she came here to persuade me to wage a preventive war."

"Ironic, isn't it?"

The two enjoyed a quiet smile together, members of an exclusive club of less than a dozen who knew the great secret.

"So," Gray murmured, "our woman of the future died never knowing that her mission was needless, perfectly needless. Well, that's luck of a kind, I suppose."

Maks had seen a meat wagon draw up to the executive office building, turn in through steel gates and vanish down a ramp. He had seen it reappear with a screaming motorcycle escort. The thought that Lian might have overplayed her hand occurred to him, but he had no way to be sure.

By three o'clock — that is, fifteen — he was inclined to think that the body removed by the wagon had in fact been Lian. Either that, or she'd penetrated to the very center of power and was at this moment trying to persuade Smith to launch a war. In either case, Maks was clearly wasting his time.

"Either she's succeeded or she's dead," he thought.

Time for plan two, except that he had no plan two. In fact, he could imagine only one line of action, though it seemed to promise little. Vray's house was clearly off limits to him, since the landlord would long since have called the polizi. But Mrs. Crane's house might still be empty, and he had a key to the front door. He could at least search the place.

There had been four controls for the wormholer remaining after Lian dispatched the pile of bodies, and four pistols. He couldn't imagine Lian

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carrying such a load of hardware into the executive office building, where everything might be confiscated. And where could she have left what she did not take but in that house?

Maks caught a decrepit subway back to the Hill. The tunnels were defaced with slogans urging war, peace, offering sex, recording the names and initials of unknowns. There was no aircooling and the trains moved at about three clicks an hour. The crowds were stolid, silent, each person sweating and giving off organic fumes. At a station called Capitol South Maks exited, climbing escalators that were immobile and rusted into place. Hastening past the Library where he'd do his research two years from now, he reached the back of the Supreme Court, or what was left of it after a recent riot.

He found Mrs. Crane's house, all dull redbrick and rusty ironwork, and for a few minutes loitered outside. Looking up, he could see the hole in the side wall where Vray's shot had gone through. Yet no polizi showed themselves and the block was deserted except for plastic cylinders of uncollected garbage. Perhaps nobody had noticed the violence of yesterday, or the missing woman.

Taking a deep breath, Maks climbed the iron steps to the front door, inserted his key, and opened it quietly.

The house was silent. He poked around downstairs, in the part of the house Mrs. Crane had kept for herself. Battered furniture, a convex mirror with a gilt eagle perching on it, paper doilies on the backs of the chairs. The kitchen was clean, bare and shoddy. Just outside the back door flies buzzed around a garbage can that had not been put out.

He closed the door, returned to the hallway and climbed the stairs. On the step where Mrs. Crane had died was nothing, not a stain, not a questing fly. He was surprised that Lian had found time to clean so thoroughly. On the second-floor landing, the door to the apartment he'd shared with Mogul was closed. He turned the knob. Locked. He sniffed an unpleasant smell and concluded that Lian had failed to get rid of the bodies, after all.

He pushed his key into the lock and the door swung open. As it did a huge two-thumbed hairy hand reached out and seized him by the shoulder and dragged him inside.

The Darksider transferred his grip to the back of Maks's neck. Its three other hands gave him a rough search. Meanwhile, from the bedroom

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emerged two thuggi in blue-gray uniforms and the crossbone insignia of Subsek, the antisubversion unit that ran a mysterious program called Special Investigations. Behind them came Colonel Yost, his long gray face bleak and frigid.

"So," said Yost. "Hastings. Perhaps you can explain why — as Lian reported — you chose to betray your comrades, murder one of them, and join forces with the criminal Vray Dak."

The story that Maks told did not go down very well.

"Zo Lian is in every way a rising star of our organization," frowned Yost. "We granted her a secret commission in the Security Forces. She passed every test of loyalty we could devise."

"Just as Vray passed every psychological test the penal colony could devise," Maks pointed out wearily.

The Darksider was standing just behind him, enveloping him with its indescribable aroma. He was thinking of the image that had attacked him in the White Chamber. Well, this one was real enough.

"It's true," Yost conceded, "that no test has yet been devised that can penetrate the most secret places of the mind. But tell me, do you have a single shred of evidence to back up your version of what happened here?"

Maks's head fell slowly forward as despair gripped him. Was there anything? Then he slowly pushed back the sleeves of his shirt and stared at his wrists. The red lines of the cords that had bound him were still visible. Along each red furrow ran, like a small rosary, dark beads of dried blood.

He held out his wrists. Then he raised his hands — one of the thuggi reached for a gun — and opened his collar. Yost leaned forward, staring intently at the bruises.

"I see," he said. "Yes, this is evidence — of a sort."

"Do you think I did this to myself?"

"No. But I don't know how it happened. Perhaps when Lian discovered your treason she tied you up."

But there was now uncertainty in his eyes. As he meditated, a point about Maks's story suddenly registered with him.

"You say that you saw Zo Lian enter the Executive Office Building," he muttered. "One of our wormholer controls returned to us with a very astonished fat man who was unable to give any coherent account of what

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had happened to him. But he claimed to be a guard at that building. That's why I came here myself — to see what the devil was happening."

Suddenly he made his decision. "Can't you see that Timesurfer Hastings has no weapon?" he snapped to a thug. "Arm him at once."

He gestured at the Darksider, which freed Maks. An instant later, an impact pistol was in Maks's grip, and he hefted it, feeling a profound urge to kill somebody. Almost anybody, though Zo Lian headed the list.

Sweet kid, eh?

"Now we must find the traitor," said Yost, "and try to undo whatever trouble she's causing."

"How can we reach her?" asked Maks, envisioning an assault by Darksiders on the White House, an event sure to attract unwelcome attention.

Yost smiled less bleakly than before. "Via the Worldcity," he said. "Via your time and mine. Every control device contains a tiny homing device no bigger than a grain of sand, but packed with nanomachines. We got the idea from the weather stations. We'll follow the signal to the place where Lian is, after a detour of eighteen thousand kilometers and three hundred years.

"Surely our trip will give a new meaning to the old phrase about the shortest distance between two points."

In the presidential bunker, Smith and Gray sat in overstuffed chairs smoking long cigars.

The doors to the armoire stood open; the TV glowed. In three dimensions and a variety and depth of hue as rich as the portraits on the walls, a semicircle of bemedaled officers sat around a table.

Smith liked the new TVs, with their built-in receiver-senders and the near-perfect illusion of depth that enabled him to feel the presence of his subordinates without actually having them in the room with him. He distrusted his generals, just as other politicians as varied as Lincoln and Stalin had distrusted theirs.

"I take it, then, that the majority of the Joint Chiefs advise against attacking the Imperial Chinese People's Republic," said Gray quietly.

"We consider it excessively risky. Our space defense system remains untested in actual combat," said the chairman, Admiral Simms.

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"How is it to be tested in combat if we never go to war?"

Gray enjoyed this kind of fencing. Besides, as National Defense Adviser, it was his role. By posing as the advocate of a war policy, he enabled Smith to give the appearance of sitting in impartial judgment on a matter he had already decided.

"Simulated attacks — "

"Have given excellent results, according to your memorandum of 23 January 2049," said Gray. "Shall I read it to you, Admiral?"

The admiral looked uncomfortable. Of course the JCS always claimed to be ready for war: that was their business. To be in the position now of claiming that, after all, they actually weren't created a problem in logic that they were not subtle enough to solve.

General Shabazz spoke up. Tall and slender as only a descendant of the Watusi could be, she owned a brace of doctorates in addition to her stars. She might have been chairman of the JCS, except that it had been the Navy's turn.

"I would remind you, Mr. Gray, that as a result of treaty commitments American forces overseas are largely under the command of Russian generals, and that Russia has not given prior assent to our unilateral attack on China."

Smith bestirred himself at that.

"Balancing diplomatic and military considerations is the job of the President alone," he growled.

"Absolutely," said Gray. "Besides, once our common enemy has been pulverized it's the judgment of the Foreign Policy Adviser that the Russians will follow our lead."

"Surely that's intolerably risky — "

"May I say," put in Gray smoothly, "that until today I never knew that military officers were so averse to risk?"

That produced an uncomfortable silence. Gray smiled inwardly. These people, he reflected, spend their lives convincing themselves and others that they're daring. For them to urge caution goes against their own self-image.

General Pozniak of the Air Force spoke up.

"In my opinion, preventive war is by far the best policy in the long run," he declared. "China will only get stronger. We control our own

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strategic forces — or to be precise, the Air Force commands them. I'm convinced that a decisive attack on China will not only win support from the Russians but spark a general uprising against Chinese occupation forces in Japan, Korea and Vietnam as well. I hope that the President will opt for war."

"When do you recommend we attack, if the President decides upon that option?"

"The first launch window will occur this afternoon between 1340 and 1920 hours, when our killer satellites will be in optimum position vis-à-vis the enemy's orbital launch platforms. Here's a schedule of other such windows for the next year."

Something hummed in the comm system as a decrypt fax sent a long piece of hardcopy whispering into Gray's hand.

Smith stirred again.

"Pending my decision I wish Condition Yellow to be instituted throughout the United States on the grounds that a new offensive is getting underway against the western rebels. Thank you for giving me your views, and have a good evening."

Gray closed the doors of the armoire on the now silent and dark TV screen, then resumed his seat. For a few minutes he and Smith smoked in silence. The decrypt lay on a small 18th-century table, neglected. They weren't interested in any launch window but today's.

"At last we're at the point of action," the big man remarked. "Congress can debate the war after it's won. I don't like the attitude of the Army and Navy chiefs. Simms thinks of nothing but his pension and I never should've appointed that bitch Shabazz. Well, we won't need land forces anyway for what we've got in mind."

Gray nodded. "I've covered all the bases I can think of. Of course, things could go wrong. We might lose a few cities ourselves."

"No pain, no gain," said the President philosophically. "We're going to revise this old world, Gray. Stop the downward slide. Save the good, and as for the bad — "

He blew a smoke ring. Gray nodded. There was no need for the President to complete the sentence.

Yamashita stared at Yost while Maks waited outside.

What! The prison release he'd ordered had set this Vray Dak loose?

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The surfer program for which he was responsible had allowed some semi-alien to go through the wormholer to destroy the world?

He thought of Kathmann's end and knew that Yost would use the needles on him without hesitation if the Controller gave the order.

"And where is the missing control — the one that's beeping out this message?" Yamashita demanded.

"It's gotten very faint," said Yost. "It's underground, we think, in or near the White House in the lost city of Washington in the year 2050."

He added, "Maybe it's been put away in a vault or safe. If so, an arriving surfer might have his atoms jammed into a mass of solid steel. That's why I'll send young Hastings first."

Yamashita hardly heard him. He was turning his head slowly, eyes panning the big, gleaming office toward which he'd been striving for most of his life. Was anything in the world as fluid as *mosh*, so apt to slip out of your hands?

He stood up, strapped on a pistol. Better to die in some goddamn primitive city than sit around here waiting for the laser to take off his head. He would trust nobody to handle this except himself.

"Yost," he said, "take over while I'm gone." Outside, in the marble corridor, he collared Maks.

"I want a volunteer to lead the way," he said. "You're my volunteer."

The two of them hastened to the nearest lift, up to Pastplor, down a long corridor to the transit room. Along the way they were joined by the rest of the task force, two thuggi and one Darksider.

Yamashita viewed the wormholer with deep distrust that verged on loathing. He was remembering how Steffens Aleksandr, the Worldsaver, had entered the capsule of a bigger, cruder version of the device and returned as a shattered corpse.

Then he shook himself and gave Maks final instructions. "Press the signal stud on your control when you arrive. As soon as we get the message I'll be right behind you."

Maks jumped on the slide, pressing an opaque black cloth over his eyes to shield them from the flash. The instant he felt something hard beneath his feet he pulled the hand away and the cloth fell to the floor.

The haste was needless. He was alone in an elegant and quiet room filled with furniture of a type he'd never seen before. He signaled as

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Yamashita had ordered, then began to explore. Almost at once he spotted the missing control and Lian's recorder disk on a small table and put both into his beltpouch.

A fire seemed to be burning, but when Maks approached it he saw that the back of the fireplace was a three-dimensional screen broadcasting a fire. The books that lined the walls turned out to be fakes, too. Yamashita materialized behind him, tore off his goggles, and looked around with astonishment.

"Where are we?" he demanded.

"In a house of illusions," said Maks.

While the thuggi materialized, followed by the Darksider, Maks opened the armoire. A row of studs with icons lined the big screen inside; recognizing some of them, he touched On. Elegantly convincing, the image of President Derrick Minh Smith sprang into view, speaking to the nation in a firm sonorous voice:

"...like 7 December 1941, this day will live in infamy. Without warning at 12:53 this afternoon, Washington time, our nation's space defense system began to intercept incoming missiles. Computer calculations left no doubt of their origin: we were under attack by the Imperial People's Republic of China, even as the diplomats of that aggressive nation were arriving to negotiate with us!

"Was ever any nation so betrayed as ours? But I assure you that this dastardly act has not gone unpunished. Within seconds a counterstrike by our missiles destroyed the enemy's orbital launch platforms! At the same time, our Space Defense System intercepted the approaching enemy missiles and — "

The picture flickered, the sound went out. Maks darted a glance at Yamashita, who stood erect, staring at nothing. The air in the room was still disturbed by the materializations, and papers overflowing Smith's wide desk whispered to the floor.

Then a deep shudder passed through the bunker. Portraits rattled against the walls and a fine snowfall of creamy plaster dust descended on the scattered hardcopy and the Persian carpet.

"Oh Great Tao," whispered Maks. "Lian succeeded."

His knees buckled and he almost fell, not from the impact of whatever weapon had exploded outside but from the dreadful realization that his

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world and every human world, past, present and future, was ending. The war was coming forty years too soon; the Earth would be ruined, the Luna colony would perish when its lifeline was cut. Maia's face flashed across his mind, and he clung to her image, the last his brain would hold.

"Bullshit," snapped Yamashita, shattering his tragic mood. "She didn't have time — Wait. I see! Good for Zo Lian! We'll have to put her statue next to the Worldsaver's!"

Suddenly he was pounding Maks's shoulder with a karate-hardened fist. Maks retreated a step, wondering if the General had gone insane.

"Asshole!" he shouted. "Don't you see? These people went to war for reasons that have nothing to do with Lian. But by bringing us here she gave us a chance! We have to get back to Ulanor, quick, quick!"

He pressed the return stud on his control and Maks followed so fast it was a wonder their atoms didn't mingle in a horrific explosion in the wormholer. But in fact Maks collided only with Yamashita's big feet as the general flung himself off the slide, shouting: "Send us back! Four hours earlier! Send us back!"

He jerked Maks out of the wormholer, threw himself back onto the slide, burying his face in his hands as the violet-white light flashed. Maks followed, and suddenly they were standing together, dizzy and disoriented, in the same office as before. But not the same.

The false fire burned quietly and the armoire stood closed, its mahogany front dully gleaming. On the walls the portraits of gentlemen in white wigs or high gleaming leather stocks and black coats and spotless shirtfronts hung quiet. Then the room's heavy steel door — in appearance, richly paneled wood painted a creamy enamel — slid abruptly into a slot and a big man strode in.

He was talking, his head half turned to direct the stream of words at a smaller man following him. Smith's impetus carried him two full strides into the office before he saw what was awaiting him.

By then Yamashita had a pistol to his face. The smaller man suddenly hared off down the hall with Maks pounding in pursuit. The man stopped suddenly, whirled and raised one hand in a strange gesture, as if his empty palm were holding something, and then Maks slammed into him, a young heavy body hardened by training crashing into an aging bureaucratic wraith.

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Gray collapsed on the floor, and Maks dragged him unceremoniously back into the office by the heels.

He found Smith seated in a leather chair behind his desk, staring at Yamashita. They were about the same size, and Smith had never seen an impact pistol before, but he seemed to have no doubt that his best course in the circumstances was to sit still.

Maks felt Gray's pockets, found nothing; checked his breathing, found him alive though unconscious, and left him lying on the carpet. As he turned, President Smith blinked twice and growled, "How'd you find me? Traced that damned gadget, did you?"

Maks tried to imagine himself walking into such a situation and realizing almost at once what it meant. The world, he felt — not for the first time — seemed to be full of people who were smarter than he was.

"I'd like to smoke," Smith muttered.

Only Maks knew what he meant; Yamashita looked around for a kif pipe but saw none. Maks opened a gold-chased humidor on the desk and presented their large captive with a cigar.

Smith fished out a gold lighter, snapped it, and puffed slowly.

"It kills you," he remarked. "We've known that for a hundred years. Are you people friends of the creature?"

"Not friends," said Yamashita. He spoke so deliberately, with such emphasis, that translating was easy for Maks. "We'll get to her in a moment. The crucial thing is this: you must rescind your order for preventive war, and do it now."

Smith frowned. "Suppose I refuse?"

"Do I look like a man who'll take no for an answer?"

Two more puffs on the cigar. "In short, I can have my war, but only if I die for it."

"You'll die for it anyway. Your defense system will not work adequately. You'll die in your bunker, however deep it may be."

Maks watched, under a curious impression that each man was holding cards, and that they were dealing them one by one. But there was no doubt who held the aces.

Smith sighed and looked at Gray stretched out on the floor. "He was the one who talked me into it," he said. "A very brilliant man. He killed that creature, too. Still, if you say the war policy's unsuccessful...."

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He gestured at the armoire. "Open the doors, young man. If I must countermand the order, I must. Please stand back, the two of you, out of the picture."

Yamashita turned away, but the corner of Maks's left eye caught a slight movement where no movement should have been. Gray had raised himself slightly and a pistol slid into his hand so suddenly that it seemed a magic trick, as indeed it was — like a stage magician, he'd had it up his sleeve.

Then his small body seemed to explode, almost noiselessly, like a rodent struck by a meteor. Hand steady after the shot, Maks turned his gun on Smith, who once more proved his intelligence by sitting absolutely still.

So, thought Maks without surprise, now I'm a killer, too.

He bent and checked the weapon in Gray's hand, pulled up his sleeve far enough to expose the piston-and-cylinder device and the trigger that ejected the gun when Gray pressed his right elbow to his side.

Yamashita turned on Smith, his eyes like jet reflecting flame, but the president was unmoved.

"I didn't tell him to do it," he pointed out. "He heard enough to know he was out of power, and for him that's worse than death, so he played his last available card." He puffed and gazed steadily at Yamashita. "Would you have done any different?"

Maks touched the On icon that in a previous time-stream he wouldn't touch for another three hours. The screen sprang to life, bland and blue this time, awaiting orders. Smith edged his chair in front of it and spoke a series of commands with codewords the machine wouldn't have recognized in any voice but his.

Maks and Yamashita stood to either side against the wall, while the president reversed his orders, to the delight of the Army and Navy and the fury of the Air Force.

Still Maks and Yamashita could not return to their own time. Maks knew by now that cleanup was as much a part of the job as the job itself. So hours elapsed, while Smith ordered the medical examiner to deliver Lian's body and all specimens taken from it to the White House bunker. Empty time ticked on and smoke rose and turned the room blue, until baffled guards wheeled a big metal casket fuming with frozen carbon

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dioxide into the hallway outside the bunker and withdrew, leaving it behind.

Things stretched out so far that a rush of hot wind swept away the smoke of the President's cigar and again set papers whirling off the desk. Smith had something new to stare at as two thuggi and a Darksider materialized in the room, plus translucent images of Maks and Yamashita that instantly faded and disappeared.

"Good gravy," he muttered, adding to Yamashita, "I can honestly say that you, sir, have given me a day like no other in my life."

Yamashita stopped supervising his minions in dispatching two ruined bodies to the Worldcity and turned to Smith.

"I regret to tell you, Mr. President, that the day isn't over. We have one more interesting experience for you. We're going to another time."

"By 'we' you mean — "

"By 'we' I mean us." With triumph assured, even Yama relented, though only a hairsbreadth.

"Don't worry, you'll be returning to your White House very shortly. But — trust me — you'll return a different man."

GILDED DOORS swung open and Maks stepped back to allow Yamashita to enter Xian's reception hall. He followed and stood at rigid attention while the General advanced and bowed from the waist.

"Rise," said Xian. She stepped forward and extended a tiny hand. Yamashita bowed again, this time to kiss it.

"General," she said in a voice unsteady with emotion. "How can the State repay you? As I read in your fascinating report, you learned of a new and grave danger, an impending war in 2050, and sent agents to explore the situation."

"Yes," said Yamashita coolly. "That's exactly what happened."

Maks stared at him, thinking with a cynicism new to him: so this is how history is invented. The losers die, and the winners make up stories to suit themselves.

"And then you yourself led an expedition that ended the menace!"

"Yes, Honored Controller."

"And how did you deal with this — this President person?"

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"Our mediki inserted a control chip and an exploding poison pellet in his head, just as we do with convicts. If the nanomachines we've scattered across his world report a sudden increase in radioactivity *from any source whatever,* the chip will blow his head off. The same if anybody tries to remove it. I advised him strongly to become his century's most ardent advocate of peace. And I know from the documents this young man" — he gestured at Maks — "saw in the Library of Congress two years later that he followed my advice."

Xian clasped her hands as if in prayer. "Profoundly mysterious is the Great Tao!" she exclaimed.

For the third time Yamashita bowed. "So all the sages have taught, Honored Controller."

A robot servant rolled in a wagon with a tea caddy and Yamashita and Xian drank a ceremonial cup together. Then she pinned on new stars, until he had seven on each shoulder.

"I chose well when I chose you," she congratulated herself.

"Honored Controller, if I were the Senate, I would vote you the titles All Wise and Ever Victorious. Who but you made this triumph possible by commanding me to build the new wormholer?"

Xian's thin face now held a porcelain smile. She remembered perfectly well that the idea had been his. But how clever of him to present it as a gift to his superior!

In the same spirit she accepted it.

"I'll have them do just that," she murmured. "I haven't had a new title in some time. And now, Honored Chief of Security, we permit you to go."

Back in the Palace of Justice, in Yamashita's office, Yost pinned the insignia of a lieutenant in the Security Forces on Maks. Lian's death had opened a slot, and Maks was the only candidate given serious consideration for it. Meanwhile Yamashita was cleaning things up again, barking orders into his mashina.

"Contact Calisto. All prisoners, regardless of sentence, will be held for life. Contact Admiral Hrka of the Space Service and inform him of the Controller's order to liquidate all 'modified humans' on Beta Charonis and anywhere else where that misbegotten experiment has been tried. I want a goddamn clean sweep, understand?"

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"Of course, Honored General. The orders have been sent, Honored General."

At last Yost was able to lead Maks before the big desk to salute his commander. Yamashita rose slowly and saluted back.

"I like you, Hastings," he said. "Not real bright, but reliable, and character means more than intelligence. Look around you. Once I was a young guy like you, and I knew where I wanted to end up — here. It took me a while, and it'll take you a while. Others' turns will come first."

He nodded at Yost. "But keep at it, and one day you may sit here and hold incalculable *mosh* in your hands.

"Meanwhile, accept my congratulations and the thanks of all loyal people. You've helped to save this world of ours — Xian and me and Yost and the whole Security Forces and the Worldcity and the Darksiders and everything else besides."

Maks saluted and marched out of the room as Yost was saying, his normally soft voice raised a little so that Maks couldn't help but overhear, "A fine young man."

Outside, a little crowd had gathered, Maks's fellow surfers, ready to hug him, pummel him, pour congratulations on him with a delicious mixture of joy and envy in their voices. Maia waited at the edge of the crowd, ready to reward him with a kiss, perhaps more.

Then why was he suddenly tasting blood? Why did he have to bite his lips to keep from shouting, No, No, No?

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

eXcreMENt

WE HAVE reached a point in the American journey where it is plain to see that the millennium was the approximate moment when both the idea and reality of populist art became extinct, when the intellectual environment of the culture sank beneath a level necessary to sustain the life of the public mind, when an evolution — a mutation, if you will — in the efficiency of marketing made the entire concept of product irrelevant. This should not come as news except to those who will not understand it, those whom the marketers have lobotomized or those who were of diminished capacity to begin with. There is no going back from this moment. The consumerist religion whose roots found purchase in the previous century, whose first unwitting prophets are the unheralded shapers of our present, has sounded its evangel and like a great wave has washed over every shore, immersing all but a few unreceptive souls in the dayglo colors and unsubtle music of its innocuous paradise vision. We sit side by side in darkened temples and worship visual displays of litany that are as childlike in their formulae as stories told in bible schools. We are ensnared in glittering webs woven of merchandise streams and celebrity. The world is afflicted by plague, famine, genocide, instability of every sort, and our next president will be a mannequin programmed to utter a carefully scripted sermon of platitudes and assurances. Our only hope is that intelligent machines will come to save us. We are surrounded by idiots.

That these fundamental observations should be expressed in a review of a film apparently targeted

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at a junior-high-and-younger audience may strike some as irrelevant snobbery — why focus even the most trivial of existential lenses upon a project that aspires to neither artistic nor intellectual credential? It's a comic book, for Christ's sake!, one might say. Chew your Milk Duds and shut the hell up! Yet as I sat in the theater watching Bryan Singer's latest film, *X-Men*, listening to the audience chuckle over the inane dialog, exclaiming at the second-rate special effects, such was the nature of my thoughts, and it occurred to me that not only was the film an exemplar of cultural decline, but a parable that might be interpreted as an illumination of our essential dilemma.

In the "not so distant future," when the incidence of human mutation is on the increase, producing men and women with uncanny powers of mind and body, the mutants have separated into two opposing groups, one led by the telepathic Professor X (Patrick Stewart), the other by Magneto (Ian McKellen). X runs a school for young mutants, one of whom bears a startling resemblance to the celebrated student Harry Potter. He is determined to mainstream mutants, to bring them into human society, despite the fact that humanity fears and loathes them. Magneto, a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto who can control electromagnetic fields, has darker designs. Into this circumstance comes a newly awakened teenage mutant named Rogue (Ana Paquin), whose ability to drain the life force and personalities of others proves an allure to Magneto — he wants to let her drain a portion of his electromagnetic power, then use her as a battery to energize a machine that will — he believes — change all normal humans into mutants. Aligned with Magneto are the shapeshifter Mystique (latex-clad supermodel Rebecca Romijn-Stamos); a mesomorphic lionman, Sabretooth (wrestler Tyler Mane); and Toad (Ray Park), whose rather pornographic powers include a whiplike tongue and the capacity to give slimy, suffocating facials. On the side of goodness and niceness are Storm (Halle Berry), who controls the weather, redirecting lightning, snow, hail, and — I suppose — the humidity in order to confound her enemies; telepathic and telekinetic Jean Grey (Famke Janssen) who functions as a healer; and Cyclops (James Marsden) who has to wear Raybans or else his optic blasts will incinerate whatever he sees. Standing with them, but not truly part of the team, is

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Wolverine, a mutant surgically altered by the mysterious hooded figures who haunt his dreams; he is invulnerable to injury and sprouts a nasty set of adamantium claws in times of stress.

After the first twenty minutes or so, *X-Men* slumps into a predictable sequence of action scenes mixed in with campy dialogue and mutant soap opera, much of this aimed at promoting the film's simplistic message (Just because people are different doesn't mean they're bad), as the X-Men battle not only Magneto and his minions, but also a right-wing Senator (Bruce Davison) intent upon Hitlerizing the situation and forcing mutants to register with the government. All this has been done before with far more deftness and style, yet just as I was on the verge of losing interest I came to notice a more significant message embedded in the film's subtext.

Our culture generally perceives the upper class English accent to be an indicator of erudition, intellect, and refined sensibility, and I found it curious that both Professor X and Magneto spoke with this accent, that in the *X-Men* universe these qualities were associated with both good and evil. But soon I realized that Professor X and Magneto were only superficially representative of good and evil. Magneto's intention to supersize human potential might well be seen as a desire to elevate, to improve, to brighten the senses — the same goals attributed to great art, to any profound intellectual endeavor. On the other hand, Professor X maintains a purely reactionary stance and voices no positive goals; his sole intention is to thwart Magneto and maintain the status quo. He is, in effect, a kind of intellectual quisling. This infant metaphor can be extended when one examines the opposing mutant teams. Cyclops, with his fratboy looks and glibness; Jean Grey, the All-American mom, the sexy nurturer; Storm, the white-haired, light-skinned black woman who expresses almost no personality and is used, rather slavishly, as a weapon —they are all conservative emblems, symbols frequently employed (whether cynically or sincerely) to denote the forces of restrictiveness, to make the state of restriction seem cozy and attractive. Magneto's team, however, seems emblematic of the messiness of art, the risk of intellectual experiment: the unhouse-trained Toad with his quick, vicious tongue, itself a symbol of verbal acuity; Sabretooth, the untamed natural man, his uncontrollable violences contrasting with

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those of the leash-trained Storm; and Mystique, the image of sexual danger, embodying the ephemeral, the mercurial, the transforming power of the mind. And of course these two groups are contending for the heart and mind of Wolverine, the prototypical blue collar guy, conflicted, angry, confused, soulful, manipulated by mysterious forces beyond his control — the man with whom the audience most identifies.

Was it possible, I asked myself, that the Orwellian message stated in the opening paragraph of this review was buried in the script of *X-Men,* that some capybara-skin-booted, Hugo-Boss-clad producer had this much clever self-consciousness? Or had Bryan Singer, years removed from his one good film *(The Usual Suspects),* teetering on the precipice of hackdom, decided to incorporate a hidden statement, a final subversive bleat, before toppling into the abyss of the once-promising? Whatever the case, the more closely I examined the film, the more certain I became that the message was there. The metaphor was consistent on every level. For instance, the X-Men's stealth vertijet, the high-tech machinery that enhanced the Professor's telepathic skill, the precise geometries of lightning and snow and so forth generated by Storm, and Cyclops's surgical laser strikes, redolent of our military adventure in Kuwait — these were the nifty, sterile weapons of Ronald Reagan's wetdream American Paradise that helped bring about the New World Order, whereas Magneto's foaming, chaotic tide of electromagnetic plasma might be taken as the ultimate expression of unbridled creativity. I wondered — no, I suspected — that if I were to go back for a second viewing of any of the summer's apparently unending string of unaccomplished movies, *Gone in 60 Seconds, The Patriot, Shaft,* etc., I might find a similar message embedded in each.

The film raced toward conclusion, the X-Men triumphed in a battle fought atop the Statue of Liberty — that matronly French insult to the Land of the Free that we've adopted as irrefutable proof of our long-fled compassion — and Magneto was locked away in a prison of white plastic where there was no metal that would enable him to use his power. (Are we not all so locked away from the wild desires of our natures by the plastic bonds of culture, kept separate from the necessary metal of our individual potencies?) With visions of a sequel

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dancing in their heads, the audience began filing out. The majority of them were considerably older than junior-high age, and most were unsmiling, gaping — they had consumed, been filled and dulled by what they'd consumed, and were now headed home to practice other varieties of consumption. And I saw that this was good. It certainly made my job easier. I'd planned to analyze the acting, the direction, the writing, to discuss *X-Men* in context of more artistically successful comic book treatments, movies such as *The Crow, The Matrix, Batman,* and to cite the film's few interesting moments, most of which occurred at the mutant school, an environment Singer would have been smart to mine further. But I realized now that these things were of no consequence — indeed, they did not really exist the way they once had. Actors had morphed into fashion statements, directors mutated into crafts-morons, and scriptwriters...well, soon there would be no scriptwriters, only directors with a beautiful dream and a Scriptomatic Story Program for their PCs (if you want a preview of this reality, check out *The Phantom Menace).* Quality was no longer an issue, or more precisely, the old critical standards had been abolished, and an entirely new range of judgments was required. Thus in the interests of the new cinematic order, I have decided to review all future Hollywood films as though they were fast food. *X-Men,* I believe, is best looked at in terms of pizza.

The film is not a top-of-the-line pie, not the well-seasoned, cheesy, crisp-crusted food item you might find at Pagliacci's in Seattle or Patty's in Brooklyn. Yet neither is it the slimy cardboard with orange sauce you buy by the slice on the streets of Newark. It's a step up from the average Domino's offering, spicier and with mushrooms that do not appear to have been lying on a countertop for most of the day. However, the toppings are sliced wafer-thin, the crust is on the doughy side, and the sauce contains far too much oregano. Pizza Hut, I think. Nothing out of the ordinary. A medium mushroom and pepperoni. It won't come back on you, you will likely not be exposed to *E. coli* or any infectious diseases, but you probably won't want to hang on to the leftovers. If you need a nosh, hey, go for it. If not, you might just as well wait for better — there are a number of upcoming Hollywood flicks that, I'm told, promise to be a Pizza One large bacon-and-pineapples with extra cheese.

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Robert Loy sold more than a dozen stories to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine *before trying to write an actual detective story. Perhaps you remember it—we published "Sing a Song of Sixpence" in our June 1999 issue. Now we're happy to advertise the fact that J. B. Goode's investigating services are needed once again...*

A Billboard Lovely as a Tree

By Robert Loy

Advertising may be described as the science of arresting human intelligence long enough to get money from it.

—Stephen Leacock

I WAS GLAD WHEN THE mobile phone I had stuffed down my pants went off, and not just because I had it set on "vibrate" and I haven't had a date since the Johnson administration. I was getting tired of staking out this cottage, tired of tailing Big Red Riding Hood. I didn't care what her nosy old grandmother said. As far as I was concerned, it was Red's picnic basket and she was old enough to share it with whoever she chose — even a woodcutter several years her senior. One thing was for sure, he wasn't a wolf. You want my opinion, I think Granny had her big eyes on the guy.

"Jack B. Goode." I said into the mouthpiece, whispering because I didn't want to gum things up with Big Red.

"Jack, hey, it's Poppin'."

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"Hello," I said kinda coolly. Poppin' Fresh was an old albino running buddy from back in my Navy days. He was quite a crusty old sea biscuit back then — he just laughed whenever anybody took a poke at him — but he got soft and puffy when he moved out to La-La Land to pitch Pillsbury. "How are ya?"

"Pretty good," he answered in that annoying falsetto voice of his. Listening to him talk you'd think butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, but I knew better. "I've got a little yeast infection, but nothing major."

"Get yerself a girlfriend and that stuff'll clear itself up." Poppin' Fresh made plenty of dough as a roll model but he didn't get to use his staff of life very often. In fact, he was one of the few people I knew whose love life was more pathetic than mine. At least I didn't lie about mine. Last time I talked to Poppin' he'd told me some B.S. about how he's a big studmuffin, got a Danish girl stashed away in a lovenest at the Parker House, and she might have a bun in the oven.

"Jack, I'm afraid I've got some bad news. Something's, uh, something's come up."

A dog started yapping his head off somewhere in the background. "Hush, puppy!" the doughboy shouted. "Anyway, it's about Speedy."

"Speedy? What about him?"

Even though I hadn't seen Speedy in a coupla years, he was one of the few people on earth I considered a real friend. He was an elf who used to have a semi-respectable job as a shoemaker's assistant. His work was sometimes shoddy, and he had his share of scuffs with the law. Once I had to help him cobble together an alibi when he was charged with a Christmas Eve break-in.

But we lost touch after he too headed for the Hollywood hills to become a shill. Things became strained between us when he took the job as a spokesman for Alka-Seltzer. But the last straw was when he had plastic surgery to make himself fatter, to look more like an antacid. That I just couldn't stomach.

"He's dead, Jack."

"Whaddaya mean he's dead?" Sometimes Poppin's sense of humor can charitably be described as wry.

"I wouldn't kid about something like that, Jack. I've got too much respect for you. As many times as you've pulled my biscuits outta the fire — "

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"What happened?"

"Well, a bunch of us were at a little party at Aunt Jemima's house. Speedy was there, and he was his usual happy-go-lucky self. You know, he always had that bubbly personality. Speedy was sitting on a stool waiting for the Jacuzzi to cool down a little. One of the Keebler elves was hitting on the hostess, and she shot him down, called him a no-good cracker. I tell you his ego was flatter than a — well, anyway, we were all laughing and having a good time, when all of a sudden Speedy fell off his chair, onto the floor then rolled into the boiling hot tub. It was plop, plop, then fizz, fizz. It was awful; by the time we pulled him out there was no sign of life."

I'm not a sentimental man, but I must admit I felt a burning sensation in my heart when I heard these words. Jeez, the last time I'd seen the little guy I'd called him a pill. Now he was gone.

"Thanks for calling, Doughboy, I — "

"You don't understand, Jack. Speedy didn't die from the fall and he didn't drown. He was poisoned."

"Go on."

"A couple of Speedy's elf buddies, Crackle and Pop, are missing. So is Toucan Sam. I think there may be a serial killer on the loose. Jack, you gotta pop over here and help find the murderer, or I'm afraid I might be the next victim. I'm not the most popular guy in Hollywood, you know, and I don't want to end up as toast."

So I left Big Red and her lumberjack boyfriend alone to kiss a little longer. The fat little ghost offered to lend me some bread, but I didn't want to be beholden to anybody. I wanted to catch whoever had killed Speedy on my own. Which meant I had to rely on my own lean pockets for travel funds.

I hate riding the bus. It's always chock full of nuts. And since this particular bus was headed out west to Hollyweird there were even more whackasaurases than usual on board. I sat in the back because I didn't really relish the thought of turning my back on any of my fellow Greyhound jockeys.

That didn't help much. I still ended up sitting next to some clown hearing voices in his head. Every few minutes he'd turn and ask me if

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somebody had said some Scottish name — McDonald, I think it was. This kept up until I told him I was hearing voices in my head too. They were telling me to put my cigarette out in his eye.

A fishy-looking character in the seat in front of me turned and said, "Lotta stark raving loonies on the bus today." He gave me a big, gap-toothed...smile, I guess you'd call it. "None of 'em as stark raving as me, though."

"Sorry, Charlie, you're not the starkest, look at that guy there," I said, pointing to a huge, stuttering green man wearing a tunic of pea pods. He was seated with three women of questionable virtue, or as he called them, his "Ho-ho-ho"s.

By now, I figured I deserved a break. A seat opened up near the front of the bus, away from these filberts and next to a hot-looking brunette. Does she or doesn't she, I wondered, but I didn't have to wonder for long. Shortly after I sat down beside her, she asked me if I wanted to have sex for a hundred bucks. I almost said yes, figuring I could use the C-note as well as the exercise, but when I realized what she actually had in mind, I said, "No, thanks." I haven't paid to play since I was a teenager; as far as I'm concerned tricks are for kids.

Besides, it's against my principles to pay for something that I hear some people, somewhere, are getting for free.

JUST LIKE HE PROMISED, the doughboy sent somebody to pick me up at the bus station. I was hoping it would be somebody who had either information about Speedy or breasts. But it was some old duffer named W.C. Whipple, deep into his dotage. He asked where I was from, made me privy to the fact that he was from Flushing. That's all he said and he said that several times. If you ask me, I think the guy was a little potty.

He dropped me off at Aunt Jemima's house. And quite a nice house it was too. She'd come a long way from that old log cabin in the north woods. The floor in her foyer was so shiny I thought at first she had buffed it with butter, but it turned out to be parquet.

I'd known Jemima for a long time. She and I used to hang out at the old Wish Bone club in Hidden Valley back in my salad days. So I didn't feel I had to wait on propriety or anything else. I walked straight over to her

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bar and poured myself a drink of whiskey — a big drink; I needed to disinfect myself after the long bus ride.

"Hungry, Jack?" she asked.

"Not now I'm not," I said, wiping the excess alcohol — if there is such a thing — off my lips with the back of my sleeve. "I came to see you cuz you've got something I want. But that'll have to wait, cuz right now I need to hear what you know about the murder that happened here under your roof."

"You've come a long way, baby," she said. "A long way for nothin'. All I know 'bout what happened to Speedy is that it must have been one sick puppy that would do something like that. I don't usually like elves, but Speedy was a lot of fun, a real gas."

I poured myself another drink.

"Yeah?" I said, when I came up for air. "That ain't the way Poppin' tells it."

"Hunh, well, I like his crust. What did that little glob of gluten say about me?"

"He said you and Speedy were romantic rivals, that you were both after that Crocker lass." I checked my notes. "Elizabeth Crocker."

"Don't give me any of your flap, Jack," she laughed. "The whole Crocker deal was ages ago. Betty wanted to have her cake and eat it too. I got me a new girlfriend now."

I had no trouble believing that. According to all the best tabloids, Jemima flitted from one romance to another, never making up her mind, always waffling. She was actually married to another spokesperson who had sown a lot of wild oats in his day as well. But he never kicked about her lesbian lovers cuz now he was a Quaker and didn't believe in divorce or many other modern conveniences. Some thought he was a sap but I thought he had grit.

"Oh, yeah, that fishwife I read about. What's her name again? Mrs. Paul?"

"Please, that relationship was crappy from the start. She's got no ambition, always floundering around, carping about this and that."

"Then who?"

"Well, not that it's any of your business, but let's just say things have been getting pretty hot and sticky between me and Mrs. Butterworth."

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I looked down at my notebook for I don't know how long. I wasn't thinking about my next question. I was wondering if maybe I should go gay like everybody else out here in Southern Commerciafornia. Hell, even that old fart Whipple had rushed off cuz he had a date with a yachtsman named Tyler D. Bowlman.

But no, I decided I would have to forego the San Francisco treat. No way my battered ego could take being rejected by both genders.

"You're on the wrong track anyway, Jack," Jemima said. "The person you're looking for is wearing a badge of shame, not the Good Housekeeping Seal."

"What about Kool-Aid Man?" I asked. "I know he and Speedy had their share of dust-ups in the past."

"Ah, that guy took a powder a long time ago. Last I heard he was in the Red Sox farm system, trying to make it as a pitcher. Well, Jack, sorry I couldn't help you more. I'm sure you'll catch the killer, and when you do make sure he gets what's coming to him. Don't let him cop a plea."

She was looking at me funny, but whatever signals she was sending went right over my head.

"Is it all right if I look at the Jacuzzi?" I asked.

"No, it is not all right." A guy in a trench coat entered the room. He had a pug nose and an air of dogged determination. "In fact, you better just crawl right back into what ever hole you crawled out of, Jack."

Jemima turned to me and said, "Oh, I see you've already met Officer McGruff."

"Yeah, I know the heel."

"I don't know what your freaky friends are telling you, Goode, but your little buddy's death was due to a drug overdose. Or didn't you know that Speedy was messing with amphetamines, cocaine, and just about anything else he could get his hands on?"

None of that came as a shock to me. I knew Speedy went through his problems when the public grew bored with elves and wanted something new to tell them where to throw their dough. He used to phone me all messed up, singing the praises of some substance he got from Bolivia or somesuch place, telling me, "Try it, you'll like it."

Even strung out though, he was still the same generous elf he always was. That probably explained why the little guy never had any of the

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millions he'd made as an antacid icon; once he'd discovered dope, the fool wanted to buy the world some coke.

And despite all that, he was not self-destructive. He knew when to stop. He never ODed.

"If you're so sure it was his own fault," I asked, "why are you here and why don't you want me looking at the hot tub?"

McGruff pooched out his bottom lip and jutted out his boxer's jaw.

"You got a beef with the way the department's handling this thing, do ya? It's very simple. Little washed-up dope-addict Munchkin has-been takes a good hard look at his life and decides to cash in his chips. So where's the beef? This case is officially closed and the PD does not take kindly to people poking around closed cases. For your own good, just stay out of it, Jack."

I didn't stay out of it, of course, but I might as well have. I spent the rest of the afternoon following up on dead ends. I did manage to track down a couple of guys Speedy met on the unemployment line and used to hang with cuz they had some bad habits in common.

Spuds McKenzie was in rehab. He wouldn't talk to me at all for a long time cuz he was sure I was a hallucination, and when he did all he said was, "Hey, buddy, I'll give you five hundred dollars for a cold one." I gave him my ex-wife's phone number.

On the other hand, Joe Camel had completely turned his life around. No longer going by the street name Big C, he preferred to be called Brother Joseph. He had seen some kind of light, been born again as a Buddhist and was training to become a lama.

I had to walk a mile or so to get to his cell, and when I got there he didn't have any ideas about who might have offed my friend. He did say that Speedy's next life should be a good one cuz he was happier than he'd ever been lately, off of the dope and looking forward to his new gig with some public service agency.

I didn't have any ideas about who to talk to next, but Speedy was my friend, so I kept going and going. I burned up a lot of sole leather, and my dogs were killing me.

Eventually I wound up at a bar, a real dive called the Vast Wasteland. I told myself a little dab'd do me, but I ended up having several dabs and

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then washing those down with even more rye whiskey. I sorta remember talking to a guy named Mr. Coffee, who claimed to have been at Jemima's party that night. But all he kept telling me was boring stories about how his wife, a popular gal named Sara Lee, had left him for some monocle-wearing goober from Virginia named Mr. Peanut. I could easily see why; the guy was a real drip.

After that my memory gets blurry. I must have left the Wasteland and wandered into a transvestite club or something. The women were all tall and wore ruffly dresses, but a lot of those ruffles had ridges.

I managed to find a straight bar where a woman named Elsie with huge udderlike breasts gave me some cheesy come-on about how she'd take it off — take it all off — if I'd just spend a little time with her. I was about to tell her to back off, that she was full of bull, when the cops burst in — I guess it's illegal to run a hetero club out here — and arrested several hot shots. I cut my arms and my chest squirming out of the bathroom window. I hadn't done anything wrong, but raids really bug me.

I WOKE UP FACE-DOWN between bloody sheets with a headache that had to register at least an 8.5 on the Richter Scale. For a while there I thought I might be dead and Lucifer was welcoming me to my new home by dancing a cloven-hoofed jig on my occipital bone. So I hunted around and found my heartbeat. I had taken a licking but it was still ticking. I lay still and tried to figure out how I felt about the prospect of continued breath and brain waves. The conclusion I eventually arrived at was: my life, I think I'll keep it — at least until I find either Speedy's killer or something that I can pass off as a love life.

I rolled out of bed and started looking for my clothes. This turned out to be a major tactical blunder, as the room decided it didn't like a perpendicular Jack and started swimming and jerking around, trying to throw me out the window.

I crouched down on my hams, bare-assed and dizzy, to lower my center of gravity and plan my next move. None of the options I could see really set my heart aflutter, but breakfast at the diner next door sounded marginally more appealing than throwing up the majority of my intestines. So I carefully put on my clothes and headed that way.

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When I ordered coffee, the waitress asked if I wanted it black. I said I didn't care what color it was as long as it was hot and wet. She brought me a cup, and I poured half of it down my throat, then sweetened the rest with bourbon from my flask. Hair of the dog to go with my western omelet, which tasted a heck of a lot like dog food.

An alarm went off inside my head and not just because the cook was letting his fingers do the walking — and all they wanted to do was hike up his nostrils. The answers to some questions I had shoved to the back burner all boiled over at the same time.

Why was McGruff hanging around Jemima's place if, as he said, the case was closed? Surely it must occur to the ugly mutt that nobody wanted him around. And why did Jemima allow him to stay?

And what the hell was it that Brother Joseph had said about Speedy's new gig? Who was he going to be working for?

I jumped up, spilled coffee all over my pants, and pitched my last Lincoln at the waitress. I knew now without a doubt who had killed my friend Speedy. And if I couldn't get across town in record time he was going to kill another friend of mine — if he hadn't already.

Cab drivers in Follywood must be brave creatures. One of them actually stopped for me — something I would never have done in a million years. I gave him Jemima's address and told him to step on it, the first time I've actually uttered that phrase. He was reluctant at first, until I flashed him a badge I'd picked up in a dime store somewhere.

"Police business," I said.

I guess he figured he could trust his car to a guy with a star, cuz he sure stepped on it then. We flew through — and around and over — the streets, the medians, the shoulders — even the sidewalks a couple times. I made up my mind that if I did go gay, this was the guy I was going to marry.

"That's as fast as she'll go," he yelled over his shoulder. Then he shook his head and punched the steering wheel. "Damn, I coulda had a V-8."

We pulled up in Jemima's driveway and I leapt out of the cab, just as the aptly nicknamed Crime Dog kicked open the front door and came out leading a gagged, handcuffed, and obviously terrified Jemima.

"Let her go, McGruff," I yelled, my .38 jumping into my hand.

He whipped out a big shiny black automatic with a barrel so long it

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made me feel positively pre-pubescent. He pointed it at Jemima's right temple.

"Jack, you really screwed up this time," he growled. "This could have been so simple. Adulterous wife disappears and is never heard from again. Everybody assumes she's run off with some new girlfriend. No questions, no problems. Now you're going to have to join her at the bottom of a short stack of bodies."

"I've got a better plan," I told McGruff, wishing to God I'd paid attention back in that geometry class my mini-skirted high-school guidance counselor almost convinced me to take. I couldn't find an angle that would give me a clear shot at the mangy son of a bitch. "You drop the gun and give yourself up. Tell the judge you went temporarily insane when the crime prevention people fired you and hired Speedy. With any luck you'll be out in fifteen years."

I didn't see any reason to point out that would be 105 years the way he calculated time.

McGruff laughed. Mirthlessly, as they say. Pushing and dragging Jemima down the stairs, he said, "You may have stumbled onto the right answer this once, Goode. But that doesn't mean I can't still catch the gravy train. I'm a whole hell of a lot quicker than you are. I can blow both of you guys's heads off before those rummy old hands of yours stop shaking long enough for you to find the trigger. Now you drop your gun and she won't get hurt."

His eyes were hard but his tail was wagging. This might be a pissing contest, but I couldn't take the chance. I dropped my gun.

"That was the smartest move you ever made," McGruff said. "Unfortunately, it's going to be your last."

Holding Jemima by the neck, he turned the gun toward me.

This is where a real hero would come up with some brilliant last minute plan and save the day. All I could think to do was clench my butt muscles and hope that Heaven had a smoking section.

A shot rang out. The loudest shot I have ever heard. I knew my ears were gone, but I ducked down and grabbed my head to make sure the rest of it was still on. I was gratified to discover that it was not me who'd been shot. And it wasn't Jemima either. McGruff's right front haunch was bleeding. It wasn't a fatal wound, but he wouldn't be catching any Frisbees for a while.

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I ran over and picked McGruff's weapon up off the ground and slapped a pair of his own cuffs on his paws. Then I turned just in time to see the cab driver holstering his pistol. This guy had saved my life. Now I really felt bad about not having the money to pay his fare.

"Where did you learn to shoot like that?" I asked.

He looked at me like I was crazy. "In Southern California you have to take a class in marksmanship before they give you your hack license."

I had momentarily forgotten about Jemima. She ran up to me and hopped around so I could untie her. I did so and she ripped the gag out of her mouth, then turned to face me.

I held up my hand to tell her there was no reason to go on and on thanking me. Just knowing she was all right was all the thanks I needed. Well, that and the chance to make myself a sandwich the next time she and Mrs. Butterworth got —

"Jack!" she shrieked, sounding a whole lot more irate than appreciative. "What the hell is wrong with you? Where have you been? I can't believe even you would go out playboying around all over town when you knew that a killer was after me?!"

"But, I didn't — "

"You knew I couldn't go to the police. It was the police who wanted to kill me. You were my only hope. And don't tell me you didn't know the score. Jeez, I practically spelled the whole thing out for you yesterday. All those hints — those big, broad hints I was risking my life to drop on you."

"What hints? I didn't pick up on any — "

Jemima shook her head in disgust.

"Oh, you didn't? Don't you remember me telling you it was a 'sick puppy' that did this to Speedy? That he was wearing a 'badge of shame'? Remember? I told you don't let the killer 'cop' a plea."

"Yeah, so?" I couldn't get what she was driving at — except the part about me not getting any loving for saving her life. That part was coming in loud and clear.

"So? Puppy, badge, cop — what does that all add up to, Jack?"

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I'm not real big on wordplay."

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Although several years have passed since he last graced us with his fiction ("Look Away" appeared here in early 1992), Mr. Utley has not been idle. He has published two books of poetry, This Impatient Ape *and* Career Moves of the Gods, *and in 1997 an Australian press put out his first story collection,* Ghost Seas.

Like Albert Cowdrey's "Mosh," this story takes us far away in time. Mr. Utley, however, chooses to look down the opposite end of time's arrow, towards the Silurian Age, where he has set most of his recent stories. While it doesn't fit comfortably into the science fiction genre ("I just don't seem able to give a hoot about those crazy Buck Rogers ideas any more," confesses Mr. Utley), this story doesn't fit into the literary genre either...and yet it's too good to withhold from you readers. So here you have it.

He says his guiding spirit is Eudora Welty, who wrote, "Man's accomplishments have reached a higher figure in our day, he may fly to the moon at any moment, but this is in contrast to the very small range of the feelings that drive him. All his motives can still be counted on his fingers."

Cloud by van Gogh

By Steven Utley

BEARDEN HAD NOT SLEPT on her cot. Well, Wheeler thought sourly, I'm glad somebody around here's got a love life, and she kicked her blanket into a loose wad at the foot of her own cot. She peeked outside at the lightening sky. Maybe I can do some painting today. The prospect immediately sweetened her mood. She felt the familiar itch for the brush in her fingers, and something more than that, the vital connection of hand to brain and eye. Today, by God, she promised herself. She dressed quickly in old fatigues, slipped the strap of her specimen case over her shoulder, and stepped outside, into air thick with estuarine fragrances.

The camp was quiet; she saw no one. She soon passed the last line of tents, walked briskly to the spongy edge of the marsh, and then proceeded upstream, keeping to the left of a broad, dark, algal band that marked the frontier of habitability — unless, she reflected, one were either human or a lichen.

And, of course, *one* couldn't be a lichen, because lichens were symbiots.

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Ugh, she thought, botanical humor. Better not repeat that to anyone in camp.

Well, maybe to the botanists....

The sun rose quickly behind her, illuminating the featureless black expanse of the marsh by degrees. Plant growth at the edge of the marsh was patchy, struggling — brave little plant pioneers, as she regarded them, delicate as hairs, sprouting wherever a film of moisture held together a crumb of dirt. She knelt, measured, carefully dug out an intact brick of earth.

As she put it into the specimen case, she heard a rustling, crunching, crinkling noise coming from nearby. She looked down and glimpsed something elongate slithering across the toe of her boot, and then she found herself two or three feet away: she could not have said whether she had teleported across that distance or merely broadjumped backward from a squatting position. She could not have said her own name right at that moment. Her entire attention was fixed on the monster nosing among the psilophytes. It was one of the biggest land animals she had seen since her arrival in Paleozoic time — as long as her forearm, as big around as her finger. Two, possibly three, seconds elapsed before the monster's common name came back to her: millipede. Then she laughed nervously. A harmless ol' millipede, she thought, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. Granted, it's an *enormous* harmless ol' millipede, but, still....

The scientist in her took over; she crouched over the animal, peered at it, debated taking it back to camp. The artist in her decided to let it be: it was too lovely where it was. Its flattened and segmented body was like a string of fat, polished beads, and its scores of legs rippled like water. The rustling, crunching noise was the sound it made as it propelled itself through the psilophytes. It ate its way through them as well. The crinkling noise was the sound made by smaller arthropods as they scrambled in search of still smaller arthropods, and of any other edible thing, amid the organic rubble left by the millipede's passing.

Catch you next time, Wheeler thought as the millipede and its entourage moved off into the marsh. She began walking back.

The camp had by now begun to awaken, and the Navy as well. She saw people moving among the tents and Quonset huts and thought that she could even make out tiny human figures moving about on the big Navy

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vessel anchored in the bay. A helicopter turned far out over the water and bore away to the north. The sky was lightening to a clear, brilliant blue, and, drifting serenely through that sky, was an omen — a beautiful fat cumulus cloud.

Back at the tent, there was still no sign of Bearden. Wheeler put the earth sample she had collected into the tullgren funnel, which consisted of a container, with a sheet of gauze affixed to its base, mounted over a funnel. Above the container was a lamp. Heat from the lamp would cause the animals to move away from the top of the soil sample; though complete extraction might take two or three days, most animals in the sample could be expected to move through the gauze and into the funnel during the first couple of hours. Then Wheeler would collect, categorize, and count them.

She turned on the lamp, then left for the mess tent. A Navy cook served her breakfast. The only other people present were the astronomy team. Gabbert, the leader, sat with his eyes closed and his long chin propped up on his hands. He looked as though he had been up all night; probably he had. Between his elbows on the table, a cup of coffee cooled and a plate of eggs congealed. His two assistants, Manning and Hayes, were rising to go, but they lingered as Wheeler sat down across from Gabbert. She ignored them and bade him good morning; he barely opened his eyes, croaked a hello, and reclosed his eyes.

Manning said, "Big news. The satellite's up."

Wheeler nodded. "That is big news."

Manning smirked. "Are you rooting in the dirt this fine morning, or painting?"

"I've done my rooting for the day," she said evenly. "Maybe I'll paint later."

His smirk approached to within a millimeter of becoming a sneer. "You're the only person here who has a hobby."

Hayes took that as her cue and said, "You're the only person here who *needs* a hobby," and smiled to show that she was just kidding, really.

Wheeler smiled back, thinly, and said, "Science *and* art make for a well-rounded life." They departed.

"Gab," she said, "tell me something. Why are astronomers such gruesome dweebs?"

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Gabbert opened both eyes; they glittered with amusement in his otherwise saturnine face. "What you mistake for dweebishness is actually an aristocratic disregard for inferiors. We're higher in the pecking order of science. Astronomy is clean and cool and cerebral. You root in dirt and stick your fingers into dead trilobites and things."

"By the way, congratulations. On the satellite."

He shrugged and turned down the corners of his mouth. "I had nothing to do with it. I wasn't even asked for my opinion."

"Are we going to have to look through your spyglass to see it when it passes over?"

"Nope. I'll point it out to you. Come before midnight."

"I'll be there, if I'm conscious at all. But I've got lots of work to do today, and I want to get in some painting, too."

Gabbert clucked his tongue at her. "It seems to me that the Silurian Period can't have much to offer you as a painter. If you'd stayed in Austin, you could still be teaching at U.T. *and* making a few bucks on the side selling paintings of bluebonnets." The moue she made only encouraged him. "Some flowers would enliven your masterpiece."

"When have *you* seen it?"

"Got a good look," he said, "when I stopped by to make a pass at your tentmate."

How *could* you? she thought, but she knew. She said, "No wonder she's been in a bad mood."

"She's been in a bad mood because of the smell. Our Miz Bearden is a bit of a princess. She's always complaining about smells."

"Then she's in the wrong line of work," Wheeler said, more harshly than she had intended. "Anyway, I am going to finish the painting today."

"Uh huh. She says you say that every time. You go out, slop some paint on, come back, scrape the paint off. And the whole tent ends up reeking of turpentine."

"Mineral spirits."

"Same difference. It's put her off sex. What you're doing with that poor painting is beyond pathetic. It's Sisyphean."

"Like Sisyphus, I have no choice. Gotta keep rolling that rock up the hill. Gotta keep believing that one of these times it won't roll back down."

"You know," Gabbert said, "if you really want to make pictures, you

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can do it faster with a computer, and without the smelly mess. You'd be happier with the result, too."

"Gab, you just don't understand about artists."

"Artists!"

"Oh, never mind." She attacked her breakfast.

He let her eat for a minute, then said, "Come on, tell me. My interest has been piqued. Tell me about artists."

"Oh-kay. Listen. I sneaked in art history and music appreciation whenever I could while pursuing a degree in agriculture. One summer I got to go to Europe, and I hit all the art museums. I was looking at this one van Gogh one day — are you at all familiar with van Gogh?"

"I only ever saw the movie about him. A seriously disturbed man. Cut his own ear off."

"I was looking at this van Gogh painting of a rustic drawbridge. It's just called 'The Drawbridge.' He painted it in Arles in May of 1888. I'd seen reproductions of it before, but you can look at a thing for hours or years before you actually *see* it. And here was the original painting, and there I was, when my attention was drawn to a fat cloud off to one side. And as I looked at it, I suddenly had this, this *insight* — "

"Whoa," Gabbert said mildly, "jump back."

"Make fun. But for just an instant, I saw that canvas exactly as Vincent van Gogh himself must've seen it when he was working on it. I was so conscious of the power, the sheer responsiveness of his hand. I saw how he'd dabbed on a big glob of white paint, swirled it just so, and — *voilà!* Cloud by van Gogh. He made it look so easy, and yet — " Wheeler smiled ruefully. "Ever since, I've been trying to reproduce that cloud. No, that's not quite it. I don't want to copy it. Van Gogh only painted what he could see right in front of him. He didn't trust memory. He painted a thing the way he saw it. I want to do that. Paint a thing the way I see it. I want to feel what van Gogh felt when he looked at a cloud, and his eye transmitted what it saw to his brain, and his brain passed it along to his hand, and his hand made it, made, you know, *art.*"

"Sounds like pure obsession to me."

"If I was truly obsessed, I'd've gone around doing whatever van Gogh went around doing. Retraced his steps, dug up my own cadmium."

"But kept both your ears, I hope."

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"All I want is to have what goes in here — " Wheeler pointed at her eyes " — to come out here," and she waggled the fingers of her right hand. "Just one time, I want the brush to be a direct, spontaneous extension of myself. Van Gogh wrote once, 'What a queer thing *touch* is, the stroke of the brush.' I know I'm a dud as a painter, even as a Sunday painter. But just one time in my life, I'd like to brush on some flake white and have it magically become a cloud."

"I hope you'll let me know when it happens."

"Maybe today. The light's going to be perfect. And I've had an omen. A beautiful cumulus."

"The light's always perfect here. And there're always clouds."

"Clouds gone to waste, Gab! Clouds that formed and dissipated in vain. But today I've had a sign."

"From whom? God? Or the Impressionists?"

WHEN WHEELER GOT BACK to her tent, Bearden was there, freshly scrubbed, dressed in a terry-cloth bathrobe, with a towel wrapped turban-fashion around her head, and looking about as out of place as — Wheeler could not think of anything sufficiently inappropriate. She settled for saying, "You're late."

Bearden removed the towel, and as she began combing out her hair, she said, "I am not late. I just didn't leap out of bed at the crack of dawn."

Wheeler resisted the impulse to ask, Gab's bed? "The sun's a third of the way up the sky."

"That sun hurries too much to suit me. No wonder I've been starved for sleep ever since I got here. I can't adjust to these shorter days."

Wheeler breathed deeply, slowly. Do not wreck your whole day, she warned herself, otherwise she'll get into one of her moods and there won't be anything you can do to get her out of it and you won't be able to do your work, never mind any painting. Make an effort now, or the day is lost. Wheeler put a smile on her face and said, with all the good humor she could muster, "I have only minimal sympathy for the problems of anybody who's as slim, graceful, blonde, and sought-after as yourself." Bearden managed a pinched sort of smile in return.

Wheeler sat down at the work table and examined the tullgren funnel.

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The first refugees from the lamp-heated brick of dirt had begun tumbling down the funnel. By now she knew them all: worms and mollusks the size of rice grains, wingless, unfinished-looking insects, some tiny, primitive spiders, and one small, modern-looking, thoroughly annoyed scorpion. As she sorted them, she kept hoping to see a new, unfamiliar face. Then she remembered the painting, and she told herself, Never wish for more than one good thing at a time.

Bearden, her toilette completed, sat down at her own end of the table and went to work.

Finally, Wheeler thought, her mouth set in a thin, firm line.

Can't let things go on this way for much longer.

Yeah, like you can really do anything about it....

She and Bearden had been assigned to a team by their expedition leader, with no regard for personal compatibility. In a small, isolated camp off in the hinterlands, the arrangement probably would have worked; with no place to go, no way to get there, and nothing to distract them from the job at hand, they would necessarily have developed, out of their common interest in Paleozoic biota, a superficial but sustainable, and mutually sustaining, relationship long on technical talk and devoid of intimacy.

Here at the base camp, however, distractions abounded. Bearden did not need to be sustained by Wheeler: several different expeditions used the base camp; at any time, it contained hundreds of researchers and hundreds more Navy personnel. Consequently, Bearden's work was becoming sloppier all the time. Wheeler, who took her own work quite seriously, could not help feeling puritanical.

Another consequence — Wheeler looked at the situation honestly — was that, here, unfairly, she herself could not simply ignore Bearden and concentrate on her own work. She found herself struggling constantly with personal insecurities she had imagined were not merely laid to rest for good but laid to rest four hundred million years away. Bearden was precisely the kind of woman who had always made her feel fat, graceless, unattractive to men. Rationality was suddenly and unexpectedly no defense against this. It did not matter that Bearden, by slacking off — whether consciously or because she was dissipating her energy — was surely destroying her own chances for a career in the field, while Wheeler's

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conscientiousness would surely pay handsome dividends in both a scientific and a professional sense. It did not matter that Wheeler would not have wished the acidulous Gabbert on anyone as a lover. It did not matter that it did not matter. The discovery that she was still capable of sexual envy and jealousy came as a very rude shock to Wheeler. She did not regard these as worthy states of mind; they made her ashamed of herself. For years she had been content in the conviction that her interest in men as men was safely defused. Her experience of men and of love, though not broad, had been deep, and so disappointing in its outcome, so distressing and even disgusting, that her libido had, so to speak, cleared out in the dead of night without giving notice — without, in fact, calling any attention to itself whatsoever. Months had passed, then a year, then another, before she abruptly understood that her work and her private interests, art, music, gardening, nieces and nephews, had expanded to fill the extra space in her life. It had been one of the great liberating moments of her life....

I enjoy my work, she thought as she sat segregating arthropods. I am overjoyed by it. This is not one of the glamorous geologic ages; for every one of us who's thrilled to death to be here there're hundreds back home, thousands, who curse spacetime for not opening up in the Mesozoic or the time of the early hominids or whenever. Sometimes I even catch myself wishing I could step backward or forward several million years to get some quick answers to questions. But I'm happy with what I've got to work with here. I hope —

Something unfamiliar dropped through the funnel.

Well, well, look at you, Wheeler thought. She recognized the creature as a trigonotarbid, a ten-legged arthropod that somewhat resembled, but was not, a spider. I hope I haven't just now used up my quota of good luck for the day. I hope I still get to paint.

Hope, she believed, was unaimed prayer.

The exodus of invertebrates through the funnel slowed. Wheeler leaned back on her campstool and peered longingly through the gap between the tent flaps. She stretched her arms above her head and made a decision and looked over at Bearden. "Go get some lunch if you want." Or get laid or whatever. "I'm going to knock off for a couple of hours and

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go paint." She could not resist adding, "I haven't taken any time off in days."

Wheeler opened her footlocker and drew forth a box containing brushes, tubes of paint, and other paraphernalia. A rectangle of masonite hung from the tentpole; she took it down, uncovered it, held it at arm's length, regarded it with a particular mixture of affection, embarrassment, and resolve. Depicted in oils on the board was a drab Paleozoic landscape, all greens, grays, and browns, stretching uncertainly to a leaden sea; above was a cerulean expanse marred by white blotches that might have been fungoid growths. An upper corner of the board had been scraped off and regessoed. She slipped the board into a carrying case, strapped her collapsible easel to her paint box, and left the tent with the case under one arm and the bundle over the other shoulder.

She lugged this cargo, panting and perspiring, to the heights behind the camp and erected the easel on a finger of rock that pointed seaward. The sun was high and hot, so she did not fall immediately to work but sat with her legs dangling over the edge of the rock. She breathed languorously. Lichens discolored the rock; she covered one with her hand. Lords of the highland, she thought. For now.

From her vantage point she could see clear across the estuary. The crumbling headlands were striped white, gray, brown; the turbid mocha-colored waterways wound through the vividly, succulently green marsh and spilled into the bay. Van Gogh, she thought, cannot have loved Provence more than I love this. When she looked out to sea, her heart was lifted higher still by the sight of two separate cloud masses, great fat billowy things approaching from the horizon. Like they want to audition. Only need one of you, but thank you both for showing up.

She got up. Time now to put all thoughts of work and jerks out of your mind. Time to paint a cloud.

She studied the masonite board as clinically as she could. It would be pleasant, she thought as she prepared her palette, to be able to blame my picture's dreariness, its lifelessness, on the Silurian vista. This world's so quiet, sometimes it does give me the creeps. Its colors are so drab, so monotonous, sometimes I ache for a bird with scarlet plumage, or some sunflowers. Impossible, of course, I'm a long way off in time from birds and flowers. It would be nice to get flowers —

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Stop that. You're going to paint only what is here. This is Earth on the verge of erupting with riotous life, and the only reason you can't paint it is that you can't paint.

Nevertheless, as she carefully scooped up a glob of flake white on her brush, Wheeler thought, God, you know how much I love art, how much I enjoy painting, and you also know that I don't think for one second that I actually have talent. I know I'm utterly devoid of it. All I want, Lord, just this once, is a cloud.

And, as usually happened when she began thus, she thought, Why am I asking God to help me paint a cloud? If I can get things from God just by asking for them, shouldn't I ask for something like world peace or at least more funding —

Stop. It.

Don't think about anything except the cloud. Not about whatever you're not thinking about but about the cloud. Push everything except the cloud out of your mind and think only about the cloud. Think about the cloud.

She began to get into it. She stepped closer to the easel and moved the tip of the brush toward the scraped-off, re-gessoed spot on the masonite board where she had tried and failed, tried and failed so many times, to paint a simple cloud —

— don't think about failure don't think about anything except the cloud. Think —

Cloud.

Now something in her did seem changed: she looked at one of the clouds out over the sea, the one she had chosen without having to think about it, and she let everything that was not essential to the moment fall cleanly away from her, work, Bearden, the hot sun, time, space, until all that remained were cloud, eye, hand, and she felt, believed in, the connectedness of eye to hand, so that the sight of the cloud whirled inside her head and flowed out, down, along her arm, into her fingers. The brush untremblingly approached the masonite board. She took a deep breath and held it. She dabbed the paint on the board and gave it a swirl. What a queer thing touch was. She said, "*Voilà!*" Then she almost cried.

Walking down to the camp, she thought, Do I dare hope for anything good again? Ever?

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* * *

She found Gabbert sitting on a campstool in front of his tent, pecking at a laptop. She set her equipment on the ground.

After a moment, she said, "Did I tell you," and she held her hands about a foot apart, "this morning I saw a millipede this long?"

"I don't know whether to be thrilled or horrified, but I'm sure it'll chap Curray's butt." Curray was a widely disliked entomologist.

"I found my first trigonotarbid today, too."

"Ah. Did you?"

"About tonight. Satellite-watching. Can I bring a date?"

"Can you?"

"*May* I bring somebody? I think I'm going to set my cap for a Navy man."

"Bring the whole Navy if you like. It's an occasion."

She sat on the ground before Gabbert, took the masonite board from its case, and placed it across her knees.

He looked over his laptop at her in a questioning way. "And? Did we do art today?"

Wheeler glowered. "It's not as easy as it looks, you know." With her knife, she began to scrape a white fungoid blob from a corner of the board, disconsolately at first, then with the resurgent conviction that it would all be made right one of these times.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

HAIL TO THE HACK

"When Charles Brockden Brown, the first professional American author, sent a copy of his *Wieland* to Thomas Jefferson in 1798, he must, beneath his modest disclaimers, have had some sense of his and the President's kinship as revolutionaries.... But if Jefferson ever found the time to read Brown's novel, he left no record...."

—Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*

I SMILED broadly for the reporter's tiny wireless webcam pasted like a bindi to her forehead. My last answer had been exceptionally well-phrased, and both of us knew my clever words would go down well with her literate online audience at the venerable *Salon/Onion/Washington Post*. Suddenly the Oval Office seemed a warm and cozy parlor, despite all its ostentatious trappings of mid-twenty-first-century status, from genetically modified Secret Service bodyguards to the laserline link to the Lunar Republic.

"So," the young woman continued, "you ascribe the remarkable rise to power of your party mainly to the exhaustion of all other factions, and to the public's disgust with their many scandals and unappealing candidates. 'The blindly unimaginative misleading the marginalized and blindsided' I believe was your phrase of a moment ago."

"Exactly so. Leaders without vision and visionaries without leaders. A regular mess—until we came along. But there was also the not insignificant matter of our enticingly revolutionary platform."

The young woman grinned. "Ah, yes, that famous exhortation. 'Don't leave the lying to the amateurs! Elect the most qualified fictionalizers around!'"

"We adopted that policy from a best-selling book by one of our members who had actually dabbled in politics in the twentieth century. As one of his characters noted:

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'They'll vote for me because I'm the best liar, because I do it honestly, with a certain finesse. They know that lies and truth are very close, and that something beautiful rests in between.'"

"And this genius was — ?"

"Mark Helprin."

The woman winked, but I didn't misinterpret the gesture as indicating she was offering me a lewinsky. She was only using her wetware to establish a hyperlink to Helprin's name. "So having adopted this revelation as your party's platform, you effectively stepped into a vacuum and took control."

I templed my fingers together thoughtfully. "Not a vacuum, but a chaos. Try to recall the aftermath of the election of 2012. I know you were probably only a child then, but surely some of the national confusion must have registered even on your generation. President Ventura rendered an ineffectual quadriplegic by a Head Drop during his Inaugural Smackdown. Vice-President Rodham holding off the New York State Attorney-General and his charges of Catskill real-estate fraud with one hand, while with the other she tried to dismiss the paparazzi photos of her and Martha Stewart skinny-dipping together off Nantucket. And of course the complete collapse of that economic powerhouse Hasbro-Microsoft-Starbucks under the triple assaults of plastic-eating bacteria, cheap qubit computers in a test-tube and terrorist-unleashed coffeeplant-killer viruses. Why, it took Seattle a month to stop all the riots and fires! And once Speaker of the House Beatty ascended to the Presidency, the moral decline was complete."

"But I still don't see how all this allowed your untested party to sweep the 2016 elections. Coming from nowhere to capture the Presidency itself and a majority in both houses — it was just unprecedented!"

"Agreed. But you have to remember that the voting public was truly desperate for uncompromised leaders. Everyone else had already had their chance at running the country, and blown it. Lawyers, businessmen, generals, entertainers, teachers, gangsters — the only organized and capable group that hadn't had its shot at elective office yet was us."

"The Science Fiction Writers of America."

The majestic words resonated mellifluously in the Oval Office, and I paused to let them sink deeply into the unseen audience's ears.

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"Yes, the SFWA. I'm surprised you even recall the origin of the acronym. Nowadays, it's such a well-known political trademark that most people don't have much awareness of its original meaning, any more than folks once thought 'Grand Old Party' when they heard GOP. But your derivation is accurate. The roots of our party lie in a writer's union."

"It must have been some union."

"Indeed. By 2012, practically every best-selling book and movie in the nation was science fiction or fantasy of some sort. Members of SFWA accounted for the direct production of approximately twenty-five percent of the GNP, and had almost single-handedly eliminated the trade deficit. If you added spin-offs and subsidies, our contribution approached thirty percent. Only the popstars and pornstars rivaled our dominance, and we had cleverly established close alliances with them."

"With an eye toward future political maneuvers, perhaps?"

I gave her the same smile that had once caused Oprah to label me the sweetest writer she had ever spotlighted. "It's hard to say now what we had in mind — although we did devote a lot of our energies to internal elections even then. But we were still getting used to national power. We weren't always a major player, you realize. Once upon a time, we were an insignificant ninety-pound weakling of an organization. But the turning point came with two crucial decisions. The first was rather arcane: the decision to reinstate the Dramatic Nebula. I don't expect you to comprehend all the minute historical details of this award, but basically that move tightened our ties to Hollywood, considerably broadening our membership, and hence our clout."

"And what was the second decision?"

"Making J. K. Rowling our permanent Wizard-in-Chief."

The reporter reached religiously up to fondle the pendant of Saint Potter that hung from a chain around her neck, and whispered a short anti-Muggle mantra. "Of course. Immediately you would have enlisted half the nation in your camp, a whole generation. What a stroke of genius!"

I modestly bowed my head. "Thank you. I was Membership Secretary at the time."

"By 2016, then, SFWA felt ready to lead the country."

"Not completely. But we had no choice, due to the chaos I've

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described. Hastily, we mounted candidates in as many national elections as we could. We couldn't run Rowling for President, of course, as she was a foreigner, but she campaigned like a trouper for us. Still, no one was more surprised that we were swept into office by the landslide results you described earlier."

"And it was smooth sailing from that point onward."

"By no means. We've always had internal dissension, even if we've maintained a smooth facade for the good of the country. The tussles between the autocratic and libertarian elements of SFWA were rivaled only by those between the fantasy gals and the hard sf boys. If you've ever wondered why we have both a Ministry of Surveillance and a Free Dope bureaucracy, now you know."

"Ah, I see! That also explains why the Mars Terraforming program has a Unicorn Repopulation component."

I shrugged. "No matter what changes superficially, compromise lies at the heart of politics."

"Well, you can't fault success. The United States of America has never been stronger or more dominant. Our mode of government by writers has practically swamped the globe. I understand that even that last holdout, France, is finally turning over the reins to their Academy."

"Yes, it looks rather as if the Utopia we long speculated about is finally here. But that reminds me of a pressing chore. I'm afraid we'll have to terminate our interview now."

The reporter followed my lead and arose. "Time to negotiate a treaty or address the UN perhaps?"

"Not at all. I've got the last volume of a trilogy due this week, and my publisher has already told me he's going to demand my advance back if I don't deliver!"

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The Reverend thought it through. The Reverend made up his mind. The results? Well, surely no one anticipated this—

The Godsman and the Goblin

By Esther M. Friesner

THE GOBLIN WAS VERY FOND of oatmeal cookies, but he absolutely doted on shortbread. Therefore, in keeping with the oft-taught moral lesson that we only value what we do not easily obtain, the Reverend James Eldred never served his guest shortbread except on occasions of signal importance or festivity. At times it struck him as peculiar that the goblin did not — could not know that in the waking world of nigh twenty-one centuries since the Passion of Our Lord shortbread was no great treat, but altogether common. However, this was an idle reflection, useless, as impractical as using the fitful light of a firefly's tail for a reading lamp.

He was a very practical man, the Reverend James Eldred.

A waxing moon hung low in the sky, swelling slowly to the full with creamy golden light. It rode the garden wall, bruising its belly against the fieldstones. The Reverend Eldred stood by the open window of his study, one hand resting on the frame, the other holding a bone china plate bearing a dozen wedges of shortbread. The night air was sweet with pine, chill with the first frosts of autumn. Soon it would be Halloween, as grownups

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reckoned time. Upstairs in her bed, the Reverend Eldred's daughter Molly lay tumbled unwilling into sleep. Her last drowsy words to her father had been a long complaint about how dreadfully time stretched out between this night and the last one in October and how she had determined that on that haunt-harrowed eve he must bring her showers of diamonds and tribute of pearls by the handful, for she meant to appear before him as a princess.

The Reverend Eldred sighed, the rising warmth of his breath etching a fingernail paring of fog along the bottom curve of his rimless glasses. Whether she stole the guise of princess or ragpicker's child to extort candy from the neighbors, Molly herself was a handful. Dutifully he recited a prayer of grace, thanking the Lord for having granted him the patience and the fortitude and the housekeeper to help him bear up under the demands of single fatherhood. Matters had been different in the days when there was a Mrs. Eldred. The running of all things touching the house and garden and daily life for those within had seemingly been the work of elves, so invisible were the hustling domestic cogs that drove them. The Reverend Eldred found himself free to set his mind on higher things than the plumber's bill or the baby's first steps or how to cook the Sunday chicken. While his wife still lived, he had been one of the few men in this chromed and caustic modern day and age to speak of his *helpmate* and mean it.

In fact it had been his charming trait of clinging to bygone usages and *mores* that had attracted the late Mrs. Eldred to her spouse in the first place. The gentler manners of other times floated in the air about him, settled over his shoulders with the comfortable languor of a blue worsted shawl. He was a man made for harmless pedantry and gentleness. Taken all in all, perhaps it had been this same antique allure — compounded of oiled woodwork, pipe tobacco, old books and velvet-covered chairs — that had attracted the goblin to him as well.

A log tumbled forward on the hearth, striking gouts of sparks against the andirons. The old case clock on the mantelpiece told the hour in ten tinny chimes. Light from the hall glowed in a harlequinade of jeweled colors through the lozenges of stained glass set into the panel above the doorway, red and green and blue and gold. The squat brown teapot on the table exhaled a fragrant ghost of bergamot over the eggshell-white cloth with its fringe of crocheted lacework. The Reverend Eldred turned from

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the window to set the plate of shortbread down among the tea things, then settled himself into one of the twin wingback chairs before the fire.

"I hope he won't keep me waiting long," he said aloud. "The tea will get cold." It was a magical spell of great power, and it worked like — well, quite literally like a charm.

"Evenin'." The goblin stood on the windowsill, cap in hand. Long, green, knob-jointed fingers worked the tweed brim into a clothy mush, claws the color of aged ivory fraying the thick fabric. A nose as warty and as bulbous as a gourd overhung wide, drooping lips that all but obscured the minimal excuse for a chin. The creature sprang from the sill, landing on broad, splaytoed feet and bandy legs of wonderful elasticity. The sum of him — from grimy, untrimmed toenails like weathered fence planks to pointed, tuft-tipped ears — was short enough to have walked into the heart of the Reverend Eldred's fireplace without disturbing a single particle of soot from the bricks above.

The Reverend Eldred gave his guest an amiable smile of welcome. "Good evening," he said. "Lovely weather, isn't it?"

"Good enough for them as cares for weather," the goblin replied. He shuffled across the carpet and clambered into the empty chair, feet straight out before him. Their leathery soles were a veritable Rosetta Stone for deciphering the history of dirt. "Never had much use for it myself. Too tricksy." He stuffed his cap down the back of his trousers — ragged brown beltless things, his only other article of dress — and linked his hands together over a stomach like a basketball.

"Have a piece of shortbread," said the Reverend Eldred.

The goblin's joy was almost pitiful to see. Dull green eyes lit up as if illuminated from within, shining with the same dumb, half-doubtful elation of those who disbelieve they merit any happiness. His claws scraped complaint from the glazed surface of the serving plate, but to his credit he only took one piece of shortbread at a time. One by one he placed them well within the chasm of his mouth, closing lips and eyes in ecstasy over each fresh ingestion. He never seemed to chew them, but rather let them melt into oblivion. For the Reverend Eldred it was all too reminiscent of the proper manner for receiving the consecrated Host, which left him feeling more than a little anxious: Shortbread had no place in his notions of Communion.

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When the goblin had eaten the last of the shortbread he eyed the empty platter wistfully, but said nothing. In all the time since he had first begun his visits, he had never once requested either food or drink, though he had never once turned down any food or drink the Reverend Eldred might happen to offer either. If the goblin found shortbread more to his taste than lemon squares, he communicated this fact purely by the act of clearing the plate of the former and only nibbling fastidiously at one of the latter, for manners' sake. It was on the basis of essay and observation alone that the clergyman came to learn his visitor's preferences.

"That were good," the goblin said, smacking his lips. He washed down the last few crumbs with a healthy slurp of tea, two sugars. "Yes, that were passing good."

"There's more," said the Reverend Eldred. "But I thought we might enjoy a little conversation first. Then I'll make us a fresh pot of tea as well."

The goblin's face blossomed with delight at the promise of more shortbread. "Why, that'd be fine, sir; fine as silk, 'twould be." He let cup and saucer clink back down onto the tabletop and worked his sloping shoulders more deeply into the soft upholstery of the wingback chair. "Nothing like a bit o' edifying conversation of an autumn evening, I always say." And having said that, he said no more, but waited politely for his host to propose some topic of mutual interest for discussion.

"I want you to steal my daughter," said the Reverend Eldred.

If the goblin had been drinking tea at that moment, the damage to rugs and clothes and even distant draperies would have been unspeakable. A tealess splutter was followed by a rising roar of astonishment that made the windows rattle in their casements, thus: "*Whaaaaat*?"

"Sshhhhh." The clergyman laid a finger to his lips and crept quickly from his chair to the door of his study. He stood there, head cocked, listening while the old case clock on the mantel laboriously shook out tick on tick on tick. Satisfied with the relative silence, the Reverend Eldred relaxed and grinned. "It's all right," he said. "You didn't wake her. Thank heaven for the thick walls in these old houses." He returned to his chair.

The goblin twiddled his thumbs and looked embarrassed by his recent outburst. "S'ry," he muttered. Then in a slightly louder voice: "You were

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having a joke with me there, eh? A good one it was." His smile had the hideous beauty of a bulldog pup.

"I've never been as serious about anything in my life," the Reverend Eldred said, and the goblin's smile crumpled away. Before the poor baffled creature could gather breath to speak again, his host continued: "I promise you, this isn't a joke any more than it's a whim or an idle fancy. I'm not the kind of man who drops rocks from a bridge to see how high the water will splash. I've thought this through. My daughter's name is Molly. She is four years old. She's asleep upstairs in the bedroom at the east end of the hall, in a white bed under a yellow flowered quilt, with a stuffed panda bear in her arms. It would be a kindness if you'd take the panda too, for her sake."

"Oh sir, you can't be serious!" the goblin cried. "Why, doin' such is — is — well, it's clear unthinkable, that's what."

"Very well, I won't insist: You don't *have* to take the panda," said the Reverend Eldred.

"Bother the panda!" said the goblin with some vehemence. "It's your girl I mean. Steal her? What for?"

"For my sake," came the answer, and then, "For hers. For her ultimate benefit and salvation."

The goblin's brows tangled themselves into a Gordian knot, a scowl to leave a gargoyle's grimace looking like little more than an ingenue's simper. "Sir," he said, "how long's it been since I've first had the pleasure o' your comp'ny?"

The Reverend Eldred steepled his fingers and thought hard on the matter before replying: "A trifle short of two years. It was at this same time of the year, more or less, that we met." He forbore from mentioning the circumstances; they had been painful for them both.

"So, just so. And we've conducted ourselves passin' charitable on both sides since, eh? All kindness and good fellowship between us, to my way o' reckoning."

The man of God allowed that this was an accurate assessment of the situation. "Please, don't pussyfoot around your point, old friend," he said. "If something about my request is particularly troubling to your spirit, say so straight out."

"*Particularly* troubling, is it?" The goblin met the reverend's Jovian

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calm with enough fluster and squawk for a dozen fox-plagued henhouses. "Man, where's the stuffing in your skull? This is your daughter you're asking me to steal, your flesh, blood, bone and bile! It's not as if you're inviting me to help myself to more shortbread." A sly twinkle showed itself in the goblin's slit-pupiled eye. "There *is* more shortbread?" He was not above looking after his own minor interests, even in the midst of this to-do.

"My friend, take her and take with her as many sweets as you fancy," the Reverend Eldred assured him. "The lordship of my pantry shall be yours, we can call it fair pay for fair labor. But take her."

The goblin crossed his bulb-elbowed arms across his chest and frowned still more deeply, to the point where his eyes were lost entirely from view in the abysmal folds of his face. "Not until you tell me why."

The Reverend Eldred sighed and fetched the newspaper.

"What shall I read you first?" he asked. "Tales of other lands? They've turned their skies to fire there, their fields to ashes. Children wander in the waste with empty bellies swollen and eyes no longer seeking any hope but death. Would you care to view the photographs? We are very good about cataloguing such things. Or would you rather that I read you a romance? Here's one about a mother of three little ones who lost her first mate but found new happiness with another man. A charming story of love renewed, if it ended there. Unfortunately this fellow didn't seem to care for a woman whose attention could not be wholly his, and so, to hold his heart, she stilled her children's while they slept. Oh, and here's a tale of gallantry! A man who sees to keeping ladies safely withindoors of nights. So far, they say, he's taught a hard lesson to six contrary females who *would* believe they could come and go as they liked, at all hours." He folded over the page and exclaimed, "Aha! A moral lesson for your edification, my friend, with illustrations: A photograph of a dog whose mistress hired bodyguards to watch over her beloved pet. They claim the diamonds on the creature's collar are worth nearly fifty thousand dollars of her husband's money. The photo and the story sprawl across the better part of this page. Yet here's a half-buried squib about a homeless woman sleeping on a subway grate, set alight by persons unknown like a scarecrow after harvest. No one's come forward to say who might have used a human soul for kindling. The police offer a telephone number for information, but

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no reward. A shame about the old woman, but an example for us all: If she'd only applied herself with the proper diligence, by this day's standards, she might have lived as well as a dog."

The goblin sat still as the stones his bones were made of, hearing the Reverend Eldred read on, telling out the tally of the world's catastrophes, the scattered obscenities of a society where poison might freely flow out over land and water so long as money flowed as freely, into certain hands; where families shattered, quarreling over dead men's gold; where children saw their parents sink away from them, into the grasp of pretty white powders, and tried to escape the pit themselves by building a ladder out of other children's lives; where people died for crying mercy of a god they called by a different name than that approved of by their neighbors. Sorrow by sorrow, horror by horror, he brought the goblin to see things his way. The poor, unhappy creature sat sobbing into its hands, milky tears bleaching the color from any scrap of fabric that they touched.

"Oh sir!" the goblin cried. "I've gone beyond my station sure enough, questioning the judgment of a man like your worship over such matters. Say no more, for 'pon my honor, I'll whisk the child as far as far can be from this worrisome world as you please." He pushed himself from the wing chair and leaped to the windowsill. Jamming his cap down hard over his pebble-skinned skull he decreed, "She'll be gone by dawning!" And with that, he was gone as well.

The Reverend Eldred took a deep breath, then rose from his chair, a man content. He gathered up the tea things onto a burnished toleware tray and conveyed them to the kitchen where he scrupulously washed and put away every piece, down to the tiniest teaspoon. This small domestic task accomplished, for fear of his housekeeper's wrath, he returned to the study and granted himself the blessing of a pipe of brandied shag.

It was as he sat knocking out the dottle of a second pipeful that he became of aware of small feet upon the stairway and the sound of a hand lightly scratching little claws against the woodwork of his study door. "Come in," he said, and almost said *my dear* as well before sharp understanding bridled his tongue: Molly would knock, not scratch, if she chose to announce herself at all.

The changeling child stood in the doorway, a white flannel nightgown grazing its knees. Its face was Molly's face gone hard and sharp and

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browner by many shades, and the human girl's blue eyes were muddled to a smudgy gray. It moved forward at a clipped and measured pace, heels knocking hollow against bare floor and carpet alike, until it came to stand before the Reverend Eldred's chair, hands clasped behind its back, a cheated landlord's charity in its eyes.

The Reverend Eldred met the creature's gaze somewhat charily, but soon regained his self-command. "So she's gone?" the man of God asked the changeling child, for he knew the ways in which these matters worked. No vanishment could be absolute: A substitute was necessity become tradition.

"Some time since, the way this world knows time," the changeling answered. Its voice was harsh and raspy, dry as the chalky powder that falls when a child rubs oyster shells together by the sea. The housekeeper would dose this Molly-thing with bottles of patent cough mixture in vain. "What are my duties?" It tilted its head at him owl-fashion.

"For starters, knock at doors when you want to be let in. Don't scratch. We aren't beasts under this roof."

"We aren't beasts," the changeling child repeated, and the three words blew away to nothingness because they had no true meaning to hold them to the world.

"Er, yes." The Reverend Eldred's fingers clenched more closely 'round the carven face on his pipe bowl, the mask of some unnamed woodland grotesque from the German forests. He felt the ball of one fingertip press hard enough against the monster's eye to leave its imprint on his flesh. "Yes," he said again, more boldly now. "That will do for tonight. I'll teach you the rest tomorrow." He stood up and started for the stairs. He didn't bother offering the changeling a hand because he knew it needed none. It owned the deep knowledge of rocks and grain and water, all the things of earth that needed no guide to help them in the way they ought to go.

The changeling took a step to one side, barring his way, and met his eyes with a gaze solemn as a gravestone. It brought its hands out in front of it and grasped him by the wrist. Its grip was warm and slightly dusty, and the touch of it made his mind's eye recall the weathered planks of old, half-tumbled barns.

"Said to give you this," the changeling rumbled. Blackened seed pearls on a string poured from its clumsy fingers, one badly cut blue stone

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dangling in their midst. It glimmered murky dim, the rheum-smeared eye of heaven. "Free pass, free passage."

"But I'm not going anywhere." The Reverend Eldred blinked at the unblessed rosary in his palm. "Except to bed." He tried to give it back again.

"Free opening of the way," the changeling insisted, and it would not accept return of the unwanted gift, but sped away to its room before the Reverend Eldred could so much as try his hand at fatherly bullying with this proxy child. He followed after, absently brushing the golden stains of sawdust from the brown and olive pattern of the carpet up the stairs.

The Reverend Eldred found his cold bed and had no need to ambush sleep. He slept long and he slept sound as any corpse he'd ever buried. When he fell into the cool embrace of sheets and feather comforter it was without a single pang of conscience over what he'd done. Why should he? He'd struck an honest, selfless bargain. In point of fact, the only thought that troubled him at all before dreamless slumber took him was the fleeting regret that he had not put out a second platter of shortbread on the windowsill once he'd learned the changeling had arrived.

"I'll see to that tomorrow," he murmured to his pillow, and soon began to snore.

THE NEXT DAY'S morn was bright as wishes. Southering birds cut wedges of perfect blue from the sky. The Reverend Eldred at his breakfast table watched approvingly as the changeling Molly shoveled oatmeal into its briskly working mouth, its smile clicking on and off as needful when the housekeeper asked it a question or offered it an endearment.

"And have you decided yet what you'll be for Halloween, Molly dear?" the good woman asked at last, fat, chapped hands gathering up the breakfast dishes.

"I shall be the stump of a tree in the moonlight," said the Molly-thing gravely. "An old hollow stump where a squirrel sleeps, a squirrel with quick and clever claws that scratch on polished wood. I shall be a goblin with a squirming sack on his back, a goblin who hurries through the darkness where water drips from stone and tender toadstools glow white, white, clusters of skulls on stems." She looked up suddenly, straight into

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the Reverend Eldred's eyes. "I shall be a tear in the sack so very small that when he sets the burden down the goblin does not notice what leaks away into the dark and runs and runs on little naked feet, trying to find a way home."

"A clown?" the housekeeper asked, smiling as she stacked the spoons. "How nice. I'll be sure to bring you my granddaughter's red shoes, if you'd like them."

"Yes, please," said the changeling, smiling. One tendril of her tawny hair trailed a path like spilled honey down the softness of her cheek.

When the housekeeper was gone, the Reverend Eldred called the changeling child to come and stand before him by the breakfast table. "What was all that?" he demanded. "What sort of talk of moons and stumps, sacks and squirrels?"

"You forgot the shortbread," said the changeling, its face now flat and scoured of smiles. "Who cares about you?"

"I see, I see. It's punishment, all your lies about where my Molly's gone; a way to torment me in your maker's name because I didn't keep the full measure of the bargain. And if my good housekeeper seemed to hear none of your nonsense, we must ascribe that mercy to her age or her angels."

The changeling's laughter rattled the gilded plaster frames of old embroideries weighing down the dining room walls. "Angels don't shut ears and eyes to miracles or magic. If that woman couldn't hear what I had to say, it's solely because her wings have rotted away like old gauze curtains. All her life's left earthbound, the next true sound she'll hear is the thump of clod on casket lid, but there are others in this waking world of yours who can see me for what I am. They'll know what you've done, once I tell them. You'll be discovered, little man with your little god. You'll be brought to task for disposing of your daughter."

"Discovered?" The Reverend Eldred's eyes darted left and right, seeking his foretold betrayer in the room's four quarters. "Disposing of — ? Oh! Surely none would call it *that*. I've given her a wondrous life to lead, dancing in the faerie ring, riding on dragon-back under warm, starlit skies. How could anyone fault me for that?"

"As men give kittens to the gods of river, lake and sea?" the changeling countered. "Do their small paws now bat at bubbles blown from

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mermaids' lips, or chase eel tails, or do they drowse beneath the fronds of seaweed forests, purring in the bony laps of lost sailors?"

"Nonsense!" the Reverend Eldred thundered. "No such thing at all! My daughter's safe, I tell you, and as for my own reputation, that's secure as well. You're here, after all. You're her, for all intents."

"I'll talk," the changeling contended. "I'll talk, and oh, such things I'll say as to make my tales of treetop rambles and lightfoot pawprints scattered over snow no more than wisps of poetry. I'll tell them whole histories of your triflings with me, tell them to all who'll listen, and I'll choose my words so that they learn things of you that will come as a surprise to your ears as well."

"Lies!" cried the man of God.

"Not from my lips," the changeling countered. "Not so any common man would notice. Not when clothed in my cleverness." She tilted her head pertly and her eye flashed spite.

"All over a lack of shortbread?" The Reverend Eldred laid his hands upon his chest as if awaiting the leisure of his coffiner. "Well, well, I've never dealt so tit-for-tat with my own folk, but I suppose it's something I can learn if I mean to have any further truck with you and your kin. Fine, then; so be it. Tell my friend the goblin that a double portion of the best shortbread shall be his tonight at moonrise. *And* some oatmeal cookies, if he's got a fancy for them besides."

"I'm no one's messenger," the Molly-thing replied. "What's there in this for me? A snug nest piled deep with oak leaves? A dream of unearthed chestnuts cast up in a shower of snow? A lithesome branch that bends and springs to partner me in my midwinter frolics? Free passage for you I've brought, and still you bother me with errands? Do it yourself, you sorry little man."

The Reverend Eldred surged out of his seat and clamped one hand around the changeling's wrist. "I'll do it and you'll come with me," he declared. "A worse compact than this I never struck. Who ever taught my friend to find his changelings in squirrel-haunted wood! Fractious and willful, all chatter and no deference, a fine child you'd make for me, I'm sure! I'll have a better daughter for my hire, or learn the reason why. Back you shall go, and immediately."

"By daylight?" The changeling laughed aloud. "You must be mad."

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"Why not? It was by daylight we first met, the goblin and I."

"By daylight but by graveside. There's all the world of difference in that place."

The Reverend Eldred snorted. "I don't see why or how."

"You wouldn't," said the Molly-thing. "You're thick as a filbert shell. Daylight's the banishment of such as he, excepting only in the sorrow-shadowed places."

"Bah!" said the godsman, who when he came down to making such sounds was done with argument. To ward off the late October cold he snatched his great black overcoat from the curlicued mahogany rack by the front door, thrusting arms through sleeves and hands into gloves of supple leather, finely stitched. The creature he bundled into Molly's red boiled wool jacket, then hustled it out the door before the housekeeper could emerge from the kitchen to question their going. He leaped the groundsel stone in the instant before the heavy household door swung shut at his back and slammed him into glaring impossibility.

The street that hurled itself against his astounded sight was hot with summer sunlight. All the sidewalks blazed. Trees proudly cast their full crowns of leafy green into the face of heaven. The stench of burnt gasoline and broiling rubber tires rose up from the roadway outside the manse to strike the Reverend Eldred like a well-aimed blow between the eyes. He stood there sweating, dazed, one hand attached to the changeling's wrist, the other stupidly clutching shut the neck of his coat against a crisp October wind that was not there. Dandelions laughed up at his folly from cracks in the shattered sidewalk.

"What's this?" he cried, wiping dampness from his brow, glove leather dragging over sweat. Strollers in shorts and summer dresses paid him small attention, often no more than a wary glance. "What have you done?" He fell to one knee before the changeling child and grabbed its shoulders tightly through heavy sleeves. "What's this unlawful magic?" Idlers whose only business was to mind the doings of the street grinned and snickered.

The changeling showed him teeth more readily made for nibbling open the hard hulls of walnuts than for a good child's affectionate expression. "I've done nothing, but much has been done to me, none of it to my liking. You've come with questions to the wrong place, if you want

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answers to match them. You might as well be talking to a block of wood."

"Ah, God." The Reverend Eldred clapped one thin-gloved hand to his forehead. His words were neither supplication nor summoning, and thus could hold no power. "Ah, Lord, why has this come to me?"

"Nothing's come: You sought it. Your quest is ended, noble knight, and all of your dragons slain." The Molly-thing broke from the Reverend Eldred's hand and capered in the street, in full view of all. Old women smiled to see the happy child and wishful young women devoured her with infant-hungry eyes.

The godsman recovered himself and seized the girl again. "No nonsense, if you please," he snapped. "You'll take me where I need to go directly."

"Yes, Father." The changeling drooped its head and let a teardrop trickle over the curve of its cheek. A sob loud enough to shiver the spire from the churchtop racked the little body. The eyes of every passerby whipped around to pierce the Reverend Eldred with black-capped censure.

"It's not — " he began, glancing anxiously from one silent rebuke to the next. "She isn't — We were only — " A second sob from the changeling's throat and a wail that sounded like a small animal in pain overruled anything he might have said, had he still owned the wit to say it. In desperation he leaped up, scooped the keening child into his arms, and dashed back up the flagstone path to the manse doorway.

Snow bogged his footsteps before he'd covered half the negligible distance. Drifts of icy white crept up past his ankles to snare him by the knees. His eyes squinted against the lash of snowflakes on the wind until he could find neither path nor door nor manse nor anything but the howling of tormented air whirling all around him. His world was white and gray except where trees in their black-barked ranks stood bare as rat-gnawed bones. The changeling in his arms, he stumbled toward their beckoning branches.

The Molly-thing laughed to feel the twigs caress its hair. It reached out frost-reddened hands to grab at the passing tree limbs.

"Stop that," the Reverend Eldred gasped, jerking the creature's hands away. "Here. Your hands are cold. Wear these." He forced his good leather gloves over the changeling's meddling paws, then picked it up again and stumbled on.

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The charcoal burner's hut they found in that wildwood came as almost no surprise to the man of God. He'd read the stories, rejoiced in tales so often told that now the scent of woodsmoke from the tumbledown stone chimney was quite overwhelmed by the smell of musty books, their spines of tooled leather, their pages stiff with age. He staggered through the snow and thrust the plank door open without the courtesy of honest knock or even squirrel scratch on the boards.

"What do you want?" the old woman snarled, looking up from her blaring television set, a neat little handgun oiled to readiness in her claw. There were paper plates strewing the floor, cellophane wrappers and white pasteboard backings from old cupcakes, chicken bones in red-striped tubs streaked with cold grease. "Get out or I'm calling the cops!"

The changeling offered up its most winning smile and said, "Put up thy weapon, goodwife; we mean thee no harm."

"Eh?" The old woman stared at the changeling child. "What are you, nuts?" She flashed a suspicious look at the Reverend Eldred, who was brushing huge quantities of snow from his shoulders. "Who the hell sent for you? Kid needs a shrink. Get out."

"I'm sorry if we've disturbed you, madam," the godsman said, filling his words with as much courtliness as he could summon up in the circumstances. "My profuse apologies. You see, we lost our way in the wood, and it's snowing heavily, and — "

"What's that to me? Fuck off," the old woman sniped, wattled face like a snapping turtle's. "You look after your business, I'll mind mine."

The Reverend Eldred's expression grew stern at such treatment accompanied by such unseemly language. "Then call the police, if you like. At least they'll see us safely home."

The old woman merely chuckled. "Call the cops? Screw it. I was only joking. Less I see of those bastards the better. Anyhow, phone line's dead. Get out and take your brat with you or I'll shoot you where you stand and tell anyone who asks that you busted in here and tried to rob me." Her voice turned quavery and small as she lifted up her eyes to an invisible interrogator: "Oh my goodness, yes, Officer, I was *so* frightened. That awful, *awful* man, breaking into a poor old woman's home that way — Why, I just don't know what came over me."

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"No one would believe you," the Reverend Eldred said haughtily. "Not with this — my child here to testify. Besides, I am a man of God. I'm known."

"Then you'll be known for being something else before I'm done with you," the old woman replied, entirely at ease with the situation. "The dead can't say too much in their own defense. And as for your brat, she'll be long gone, lost in the winter woods. They'll find her frozen if they find her at all. Oh what a pity, dearie, dearie me."

"You're an evil woman," the Reverend Eldred said, glaring at the old woman as though the red fury in his eyes could kindle her aflame with witch-devouring fire.

"Then leave me to be evil in peace!" the beldame shrieked, flying from her chair to shove him back. The handgun dropped to the rag rug on the floor and bounced. The Molly-thing leaped to snatch it up and took a large bite from the barrel, purest licorice spiced with dust and grit and the salt of its mistress's clammy hand.

"Curses!" the old woman cried, seeing her sham weaponry revealed for what it truly was. "Father said I always let my temper get the better of me. I hope he burns in Hell."

The Reverend Eldred pursed his lips in disapproval, and without thinking cast a wary look at the changeling, as if that creature might be adversely affected in its role as his child by overhearing such unfilial talk. "Your father did right to correct your faults of character," he said. "To *try* to do so, at any rate. I expect there's just so much a parent can do."

"How would you know if he even tried?" the changeling demanded around a mouthful of licorice. "Just so much a parent can do, if one chooses to do anything at all." Black rivulets slithered from the corners of its mouth, giving it the look of a ventriloquist's dummy.

The Reverend Eldred nabbed the creature's wrist once more. "We're going," he told it. "Snow or no snow, we're getting out of this ghastly place." He opened the bottom two buttons of his overcoat and dug into his trouser pocket with his free hand. "My blessed free passage is all you harp on. Very well, so let it be, you've won. Free passage out of here's all I desire. Show me the way that I may use this trinket to obtain it and we're quits. And not an instant before I'd like it." Sooty seed pearls shone in the glare of the still-braying television set. A single blue stone caught and captured

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the cold light of tiny people chattering like caged squirrels over little things.

"Oh!" The old woman lifted up her hands toward the glittering stone, the gleaming pearls. The light they snared and held pulsed through the thin flesh of her fingers, showing the fragile bones. She tried to seize it but the Reverend Eldred jerked it away and she collapsed wailing in the tumbled trash beside her tattered chair.

"What do you want with this thing?" he asked of her. "It's grimy and old, worth little if not nothing. Besides, it's mine."

"And mine, once," the old woman wept. "*Mine.* Free pass, free passage, free opening of the way. Ah, the beating of their great emerald-scaled wings against the evening skies! The songs of silver-tailed sirens from the distant reefs, the high, wild, gladsome pipes of Faerie that partnered us in our moonlight dances! Times are, when I turn down my bed at night and set my shoes aside, I think that I still feel the tender grass underfoot and the cool sweetness of the dew between my toes." She yanked off shoe and stocking to display a foot whose skin had hardened into horn, toenails tough and thick as any goblin's.

The Reverend Eldred let go of the changeling's wrist and knelt beside the grief-bent old woman. "Whose child were you?" he breathed, cupping her heel in the palm of his hand. The seed pearl strand snaked up to ring her ankle and the light that throbbed from that flimsy shackle banished scaly skin and wrinkles, liver spots and the slowly hardening shell the years had laid down. The ancient toenails shrank from yellowing planks to small, pink bits like the frost-captured petals of a rose, the ungainly foot itself melted back until it fit exactly within the godsman's grasp. His eyes flickered up to meet his daughter's face, revealed for the merest wink of time behind that age-harrowed mask of bleak days and barren years.

"Ah, God!" the Reverend Eldred cried, and this time there was a heart that broke behind the words, love that bled and wept. He hugged the withered body of his child, willing back her infant softness, her vanished youth, the ripeness of years that he had shut away the moment he bequeathed her to the goblin's keeping.

"Let me go." Crabbed hands pushed weakly against his chest. An old woman with one bare foot as aged as the rest of her fought free of his embrace.

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"Molly, don't you know me?" the Reverend Eldred implored, striving to caress her cheek, to brush his fingers through the iron gray tangle of her hair.

"Know you?" she said. "No. Why should I? You're nothing to me but a trespasser. I can't make you get out of my house, but I wish I could. I like to be alone; it's safe. If I didn't believe it before, it's people like you who teach me the same lesson all over again. Everything out there's spoiled, rotted through, ready to fall to pieces. Everywhere you look you find death, disaster, heartbreak, loss. Doctors kill us, teachers show us our stupidity, leaders march us over cliffs to the sound of bugles, lovers might as well be talking to a mirror, mothers ought to squat over open graves when they give birth just to save time. Best keep yourself to yourself and wait life out, if you want to come through it unscathed. I'm the only one who's sane enough to know how things work in this world." She pulled herself backward, away from him, so that her head was haloed by the television screen. "And my name's not Molly."

"How can you say that?" the Reverend Eldred asked with the persistence of despair. "I saw your true face, I know you: You're my child."

"You're crazy!" the old woman shouted, gesturing wildly with one arthritis-knotted hand. "Just as crazy as your kid. Go on, get out of here, there's nothing in this house you need!"

"But what about this?" He held out the seed-pearl strand, the dangling blue stone. She couldn't help but see it. "You said it was yours once. Take it! Take it and come back to what you were!"

She shook her head vigorously. "Oh no," she said. "You won't fool me twice. That's just a gewgaw, plain and simple, a bauble, a trinket, a trifle. Take it and stick it where the sun don't shine!"

The Reverend Eldred might have pressed his point, but just then the old woman summoned up a burst of startling strength from some unsuspected reservoir and sprang to her feet. She hooked into the godsman's overcoat, collar and seat, and dragged him to the door. The changeling scampered ahead to hold it open, giggling in a manner some might call mad if they were unfamiliar with the workings of a squirrel's mind. Balmy air wafted over the Reverend Eldred's face as he found himself flying out of the lowly hut and headfirst into the gracious green of a springtime meadow.

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* * *

He landed on his nose amid the daisies. The sun cradled him in warmth, the new grass gave up a sweet savor where his weight crushed it. He pushed himself groggily to hands and knees and looked around, dazed. The winter woods were gone, all was pasture, sweet rolling hills misted over with flowers. Here and there he glimpsed a solitary willow and the aimless wandering of a brook. The grass stirred with a thousand insects and the private commerce of fieldmice.

"You didn't lose it, did you?" the changeling asked, leaning its full weight on the Reverend Eldred's still-bowed back, a genial toper resting one elbow on the tavern bar. "Ah, no, there it is." It stooped to pluck at the seed pearl string, still wrapped tightly around his hand.

The Reverend Eldred stood up, brushing bits of grass from his coat. "We must go back," he said, searching the meadow for the vanished cottage. "I can't just leave her there like that, alone."

"Why not? Out of practice?" The changeling danced in an ecstasy of springtime over the meadow, then with a giggle took to its heels, racing up the hillside.

"Stop! Come back!" The godsman's commands were empty air, and the changeling was out of sight behind the hill before he realized how useless it was to expect obedience of a being that knew neither dread nor duty. "No wonder the world's gone the way it has," he muttered as he set out smartly after the wanton thing. "Overrun with such creatures, I shouldn't be at all surprised." And if he likewise wondered how so many other mortal folk had come to strike similar bargains with goblinkind for the removal and replacement of their trueborn children, that was a path whose shadows soon turned him back. It was easier to hunt the changeling child, and so that was what he did.

He climbed the hill's crest in time to see the Molly-thing leaping the brook at its foot. He reached the brook in time to spy the changeling dash happily across a fresh expanse of green. Boiled wool jacket went flying free, a flash of red against a sky too blue for earthbound eyes to bear. Shoes were kicked away, and stockings promptly followed after only an awkward hop or two to roll them down and toss them aside. Dress and smallclothes spattered the landscape, puddles of gleefully abandoned cloth, until the changeling was a tiny, pink-skinned figure in the middle distance, naked

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except for the godsman's too-big leather gloves. They flapped at the ends of the creature's arms like the wings of captive moths, but for whatever reasonless reason, the fleeing Molly-thing would not part with them. A pale golden sawdust haze trailed after it, a sunlit, skyborne ribbon-road for sylphs, pixies, sprites, and feys to ride.

Ride it they must and did: It didn't take them long to rise to such a lure. The airy folk were dancing down the golden pathway in the changeling's wake by the time the Reverend Eldred caught up close enough to hear the Molly-thing's ungovernable laughter. Minuscule silver-green fingers plucked at his hair. His nostrils filled with the flowery scent of the fey, his cheeks were gently battered by the beating of their gossamer wings. Grimly he closed his mouth as he ran on, lest he inhale wonders.

At the top of a second hill, his heel slipped on a patch of shade-sheltered dew and he went skidding down the slope, feet flailing air. The fairies swarmed up, wings humming in a frenzy of alarm, only to settle down in a blanket of jeweled beauty over his black greatcoat when he came to rest at the bottom. He held up his hands to shield his eyes from their myriad sloe-eyed stares, and the blue stone snared on its rope of pearls twirled from his fingers in the sunlight. The faerie host fell back in awe at the sight, making the music of their alien tongue, and offered him neither help nor hindrance when he again got to his feet.

"Where did she go?" he asked them as he stood scanning the horizon's compass in a slow circle of despair. The Molly-thing was gone, lost to view. It seemed impossible — the world before him was wide open — and yet she'd somehow contrived to run fast and far enough so that he could no longer see her, not even as a pinprick in the distance. The tender grass of springtime would not yield up so much as a bent stalk to give him some clue as to which way she'd run. "Where is she? Help me! Take me to her, I beg you." And in the moment of that plea he knew it was not the Molly-thing he sought, but his own child. He held out his two hands cupped together, as if he hoped to feed the folk of air and light an offering of nectar. Pearls gleamed serenely between his trembling fingers. "Grant me, bright ones, free pass, free passage, free opening of the way!"

The faerie host hovered in the air just above his hands for the time it would take him to rattle through his old good-nights with Molly, then all

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of them ascended in a cloud of winged splendor and were lost against the burning circle of the sun. The Reverend Eldred, ridiculous in his somber coat and ardent entreaties, was left to stand alone.

He stood there thus for some time, helpless in the midst of the bright spring meadow's beauty. No matter in which direction he gazed, there was no sign to make it seem more worthy of his footsteps than any other. So much equivalence baffled him into immobility; only his lips moved to whisper, "Molly?" There was neither child nor changeling nor even a breeze to answer.

"Ah, *God!*" His cry of loss split heaven open to the bone. Had he looked up instead of crumpling earthward he might have seen angels staring down at him in startlement. He gripped the strand of grimy pearls between white-knuckled hands clasped so tightly in prayer that they shook like dying leaves. His head was bowed, his whole body hunched forward, his eyes squeezed shut to the point where doubt remained as to whether he'd ever find the strength to open them again and see the world he'd made himself. He rocked there on his knees, moaning Molly's name and calling on his God from out of that ache beyond a broken heart which is a broken soul.

"There now, friend." A coarse hand closed itself around both of his as easily as a man might lay hold of a walnut. "If you wanted her back so bad, you'd but to say."

The godsman lifted up his eyes and saw the goblin's elegantly ugly face. The creature was clad as he always was, save for the fact that now he no longer came cap-in-hand, but instead held a familiar pair of gloves. He took a step backward, letting go the Reverend Eldred's hands, until he'd edged himself up against the clean, cold stone that marked a woman's grave.

"Where is she?" the Reverend Eldred entreated him, kneeling among autumn-withered ivy shoots, hands still welded in prayer. "Give her back to me!"

"No back about it," the goblin said. "Seein' as how I never took her away."

"You...never — ?"

"She sleeps where I found her, all tucked in nice an' proper in her own bed, as is only fittin'." The goblin nodded, satisfied with this state of

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things, for the goblins are a race notorious for their love of due process and propriety. "As you might've seen for yourself if you'd taken the bother to go look in on her."

"I thought she was gone," the Reverend Eldred whispered. "As soon as the changeling came to me that night, I simply assumed that it had been left with me in exchange for something. For her. For Molly."

"'Tweren't no changeling." The goblin tipped him a wink. "'Twere only me."

"You?" The godsman stared.

"Sure as stone. I thought the better of our pact, but what use was that? I knew there'd be no bringin' you around by argufyin'. You'd fight to hold me to the bargain."

The Reverend Eldred shook his head slowly. "I only wanted to shelter her from a hard world." The ivy stems between his knees writhed into the face of the old woman in the woods. Her scowl was terrible to see, and she parted twisted brown lips as if to repeat her cynic's litany. The godsman jerked his gaze away sharply, wanting neither to hear nor see such things again. "I meant her nothing but the best," he offered weakly.

"Did you, now?" The goblin's soft-spoken question was the delicate touch of a tongue against an aching tooth. The godsman winced to hear it.

"No," he admitted dully, and with that small truth he felt confession cleanse his soul. "Not her best, but my own." He climbed slowly to his feet, one hand leaning upon the rough, unpolished top of the gravestone. "I've done wrong, but I'll make amends."

"Then go home," said the goblin, "and see that you do." With which he took the Reverend Eldred's gloves in one hand and lashed them sharply across the godsman's eyes.

The pain blazed red, then black with fleeting blindness. The Reverend Eldred cried out at the searing touch. He staggered back, groping with one hand for the support of another gravestone, only to have his fingers close on air, then on panic, then on the answering touch of a velvet chair. He opened his eyes to the same familiar study he'd quitted hours or days or ages ago. Something glinted on the windowsill. He rose from his seat and saw the china plate licked clean of shortbread crumbs.

"Father?"

His daughter's voice turned him where he stood, the plate trembling

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in his hand. Tall and womanly, she filled his sight with the same tranquil beauty he'd last seen on another face now lost beneath earth and ivy and a chiseled stone. "I heard you shout," she said, hovering in the doorway like a dream, holding her soft yellow robe closed at the collar. "I thought you might wake the children, but we were lucky. Are you all right?"

"Molly?" The godsman took one uncertain step toward the woman. His sight blurred with tears and time, yet still he scanned her face for evidence of how the world's harshness might have marked her. The corners of her eyes and mouth were lightly touched with lines that spoke of smiles and some few sorrows, but they were warm as a welcoming hearthfire.

She crossed the room to meet him more than halfway, resting her hands on his shoulders and giving him a kiss. "You must have nodded off in your chair," she said. "Worn out, poor love; those children of mine can be a handful, I know. I'll take that to the kitchen for you." She relieved him of the empty plate and was gone.

"Children...*Her* children — !" The Reverend Eldred staggered to the open window. "Lost," he breathed into the night. "So much I've lost, thrown away — "

" — not got yet," said a voice from the frost-killed flowerbed beneath the sill. The goblin sprang into view, jigging dead geranium stems out from between his toes. "Sorry," he said, gruff as an unearthed badger. "Brought you back to her instead of her back to you. But see? You haven't done so bad by her, once you tried."

"I did that?" The Reverend Eldred gazed longingly after his grown daughter. "I was able to save her from the world?"

"She didn't want saving from it." The goblin patted the godsman's hand. "They never do."

"Then what — ?"

"Only to be taught the way to see it. What's the world but frights and wonders?" the goblin asked. "Music and bones, sunlight and swords, hunger and butterflies. Who'll give 'em the wisdom to choose aright if all they're taught is fear of everything?"

"But so much evil — !" the godsman protested.

"The world's no less wondrous for all that. Not every serpent's got a sting, and yet...some do. You taught her how to tell. *That* was the saving

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of her; aware's not afraid. Stones bruise or break you, yet it's stones that make good, solid pathways home."

"Home..." The Reverend Eldred slumped against the window, drunk with riddles.

"Right, home, just as you say. My mistake, your coming here, but no harm, no harm, quickly cured, soon mended, won't take a minute." Fine leather gloves flapped like batwings in the moonlight. The Reverend Eldred blinked and found himself staring not out a window but dead on at a door. Dazed, he had no idea at all of how he'd come there, nor where he'd been, nor what he ought to do next.

In the end, he decided he would not have come to a door he did not intend to open.

The room was snug and smelled of white soap, with only the steadfast glow of a shepherdess nightlight to ward back the darkness. "Daddy?" Molly mewled drowsily from her bed and rutched around under the covers. "Is it morning?" She was asleep again before he could answer.

He closed the door and went downstairs to find his fire and his pipe and his shattered certainties all waiting patiently. He sat there in the velvet-covered wingback chair, staring into the dwindling flames for a time outside of time. He thought that there was something he ought to remember, a journey forgotten or not yet begun. Pipe smoke crept up the invisible trellis of the air. The old case clock on the mantelpiece was still, though in the silence where its heavy ticks and tocks once fell, the godsman now heard only the measured flap of dragons' wings, the chirr of faerie flight, a squirrel's mad, mindless chatter, the cold blare of an old woman's television set, and beyond them all, the laughter of a child.

When his pipe went out, he rose and went back up the stairs to the closed bedroom door. He did not return to his study alone.

An autumn dawn was just streaking the sky with pink and purple and gold when the goblin poked his snout over the windowsill and stole into the godsman's study. Flat feet slapped across the floor until the creature stood staring up at the man who slept in the big wingback chair, his daughter in his arms. The rise and fall of their sleeping breaths barely stirred the priceless string of pearls with its diamond pendant that interlaced their fingers.

Very carefully, very dexterously for one whose hands looked to have

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all the grace of shovel blades, the goblin plucked the luminous strand free without disturbing either sleeper. He held it up to the first dazzle of day and chuckled softly to himself before cramming it into his trousers' back pocket and scrambling out the window. He paused for only a breath upon the sill, and a last backward glance at the dreamers.

"Not shortbread — " He set his cap at a more rakish angle on his blocky head. " — but it'll do." A morning free of sorrow's shadows took him, and he was gone from the godsman's house forever.

Coming Attractions

Next month we immerse ourselves fully in the new century—no more to-ing and fro-ing about how to count the clock. Like it or not, the future is here.

We'll greet the new century with an old friend: the dinosaur. Richard Chwedyk's remarkable cover story, "The Measure of All Things," treats us to an entirely different look at the saurians. It won't make you reconsider Alvarezes's asteroid impact theory of extinction, but it might change the way you see parts of the world in 2001.

Also on the card for next month is a new tale from Robert Reed. "Crooked Creek" takes us out on the links for a few holes. It also examines the links we have with our pasts, and perhaps suggests a way of filling in some of the holes in our lives...

European novelist Andreas Eschbach will also be on hand next month with a short and sharp fantasy that should serve as a fine English-language introduction to his work.

In the coming year, we expect to bring you novellas by Jack Dann, Lucius Shepard, Iàn Watson, and Kate Wilhelm (accompanied by cover illustrations by the likes of Michael Garland, Ron Walotsky, and Barclay Shaw). We've got shorter works on tap from Amy Sterling Casil, Nancy Etchemendy, Stephen Gallagher, Harvey Jacobs, and Robert Sheckley. We've got knockout stories from several new writers. We've got material that will stretch your mind and expand your imagination. We hope you'll enjoy it all.

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CURIOSITIES

THE LONDON ADVENTURE, BY ARTHUR MACHEN (1924)

OSTENSIBLY the third volume of his autobiography, Arthur Machen's *The London Adventure* is actually a book about the failure to write a book called *The London Adventure*.

Machen, the great visionary author of such classics of the fantastic as *The Great God Pan*, *The Three Impostors*, and *The Hill of Dreams*, had told the story of his life in two earlier volumes — *Far Off Things* and *Things Near and Far* — and now intended to give his readers a history of his impressions of London when he first moved there at the end of the nineteenth century.

He does nothing of the kind.

Instead, referring throughout to the book he has in mind as *The Great Work on London*, he proceeds, with consummate good humor, to demonstrate his absolute inability to get down to it. It's a book in which form matches content perfectly; constantly sounding warning notes to fellow writers and interested readers about the perils of digression and the pitfalls of prevarication, Machen meanders entertainingly through nearly two hundred pages of interesting digressions and entertaining prevarications.

And what digressions! In addition to being one of the best books ever written about not writing, *The London Adventure* is also a proto-Fortean catalogue of curiosities and coincidence, an inventory of the inexplicable that forms a fine nonfiction companion to his fiction's obsessive love of metaphysical mystery. By the time Machen takes his leave of us, full of apologies for his failure to deliver the book he had promised and full of shame for the book he has actually written ("I had thought of calling the book *The Curate's Egg* but I have a distaste for boastful titles"), we feel far from cheated — feel instead that we've read a fine book on writing, on London, and on the world and its secret life. ☙

— Peter Atkins

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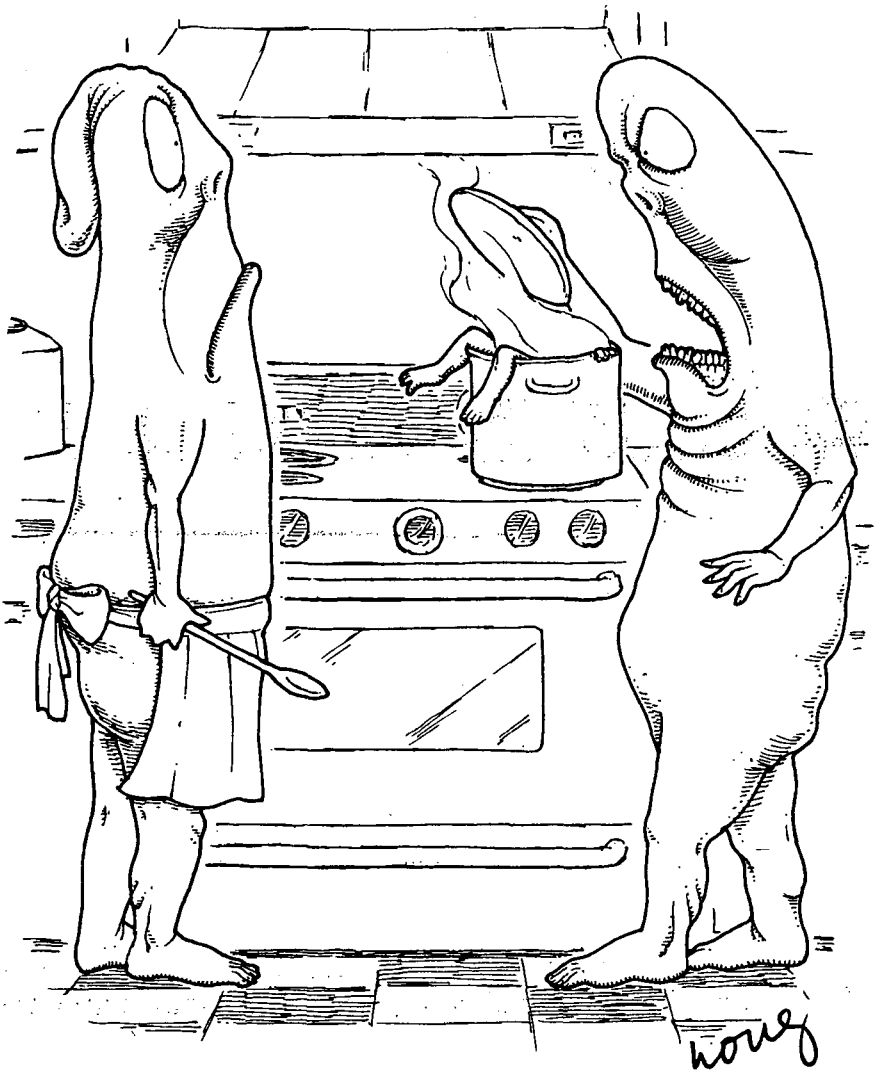

"ARE WE HAVING OUR YOUNG AGAIN!?"

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